

DECEMBER/JANUARY/FEBRUARY No 56/57 / £2.50 / \$8.00 / 700 PTS / 7000 L / 11 DM / 35 FR

PERFORMANCE

STATION HOUSE OPERA



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PERFORMANCE + ART / THEATRE / MUSIC / VIDEO / DANCE / SPECTACLE

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Three shows for Christmas without dames or tinsel

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- Fri 23 Dec Heathcote Williams' extraordinary poem

8.00 A hymn to the world's oldest mammal that combines artistry with hard facts and leaves audiences shocked, humbled and exhilarated.

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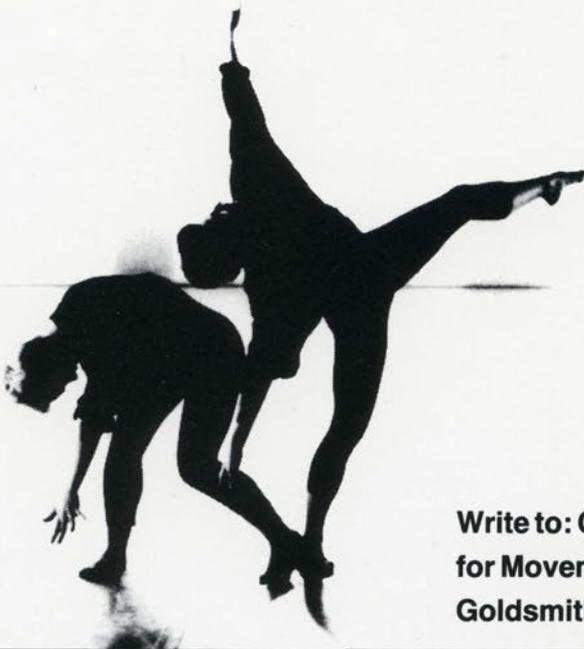
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In association with Dartington College, Brighton Polytechnic, Trent Polytechnic and Newcastle Polytechnic the Arts Council is offering 4 residencies for artists experienced in presenting Live work.

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For application forms and for further details contact Jeni Walwin, Arts Council of Great Britain, 105 Piccadilly, London W1V 0AU

Closing date for applications 20 January 1989.

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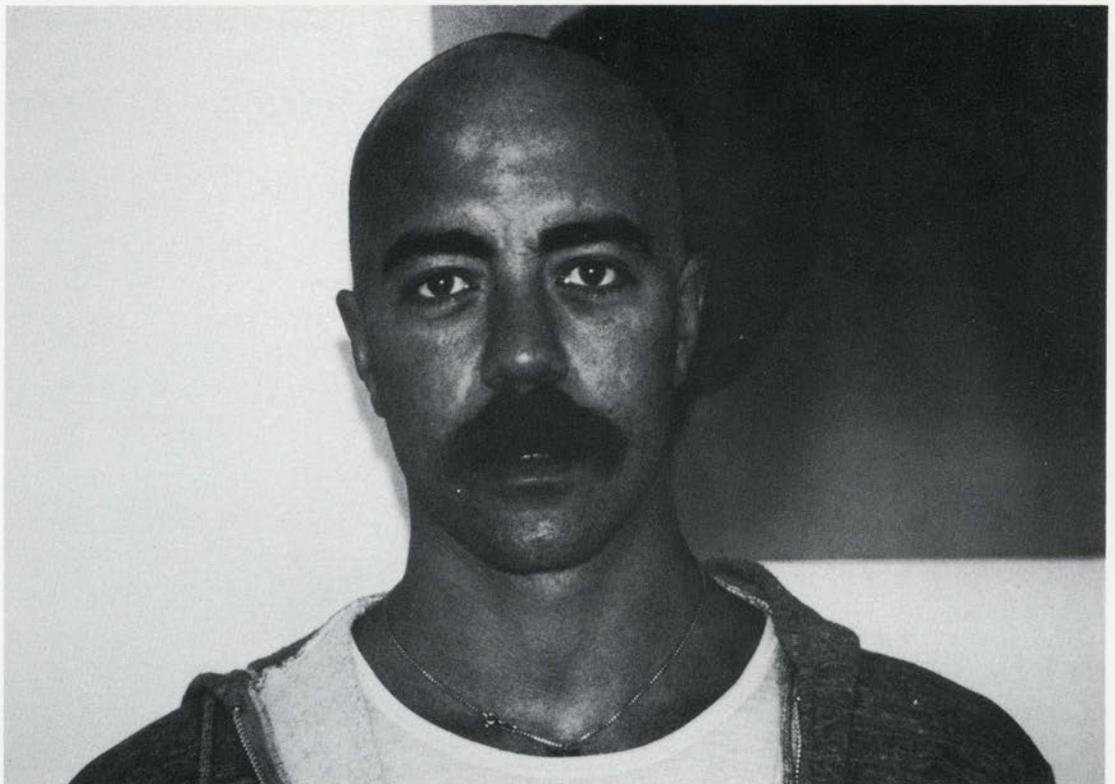
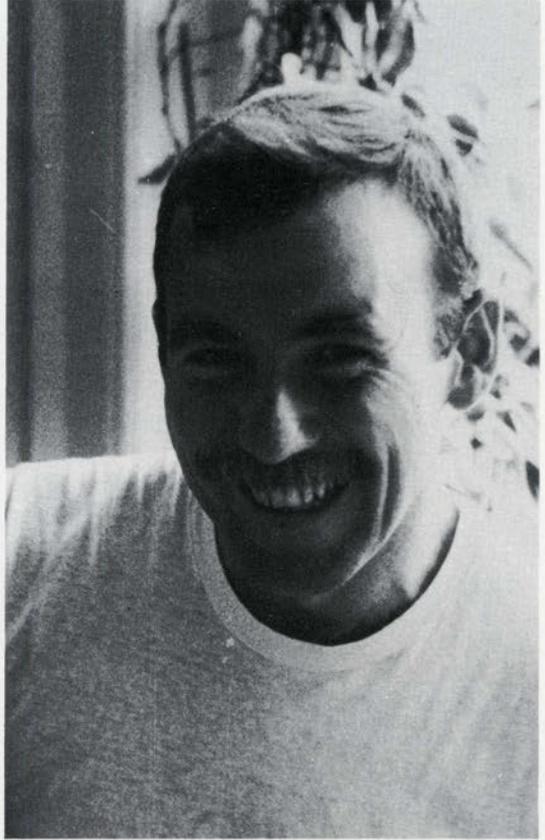
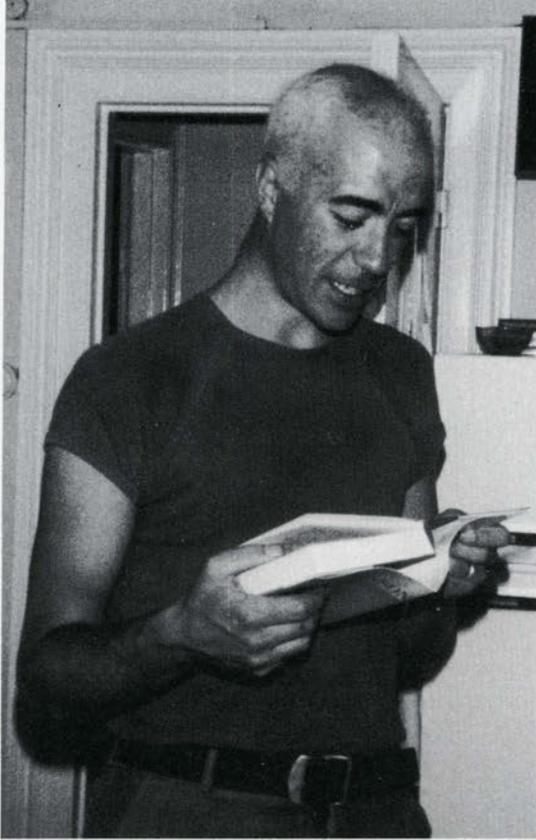
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STEVE ROGERS (left and below) and **MARK STEPHENS**, pictured here died in Scarborough and London respectively as we went to press. Steve, as readers will know, was Editor of the magazine for the past two years and a regular correspondent since it started. Mark, Steve's partner was a mainstay, helping in his spare time with all aspects of production. The loss to the magazine and the art world, not to mention their friends and colleagues is immeasurable. A full appreciation will be published in the next issue.



contents



SHOWING THE WIRES + Julian Maynard Smith interviewed by Steve Rogers 9

THE TIME HAS COME THE WALRUS SAID + Simon Penny on Art in the age of the thinking machine 15

BREAKING THE FRAME + Nick Kaye on the use of extremes in performance art 23

EPILEPSY: PERFORMANCE, SPECTATORSHIP & ABJECTION + by Jane Giles 26

TALKING WITH A HEAD + Tina Weymouth has a chat with Peter Culshaw 29

A QUESTION OF DIFFERENCE + Mark Gaynor pursues the much loved debate between theatre and fine art 31

MIND THE GAP + Time Based Media at Humberside College of Higher Education 33

EDGE 88 + A record of Britains first experimental art biennale 34

REVIEWS + Gloria, Theatre on a String, 1988 Olympic Games, Zofia Kalinska, Butthole Surfers, Tony White 36

● **COVER PHOTOGRAPH** ● Station House Opera, A Split Second of Paradise, Venice Biennale, 1987

● **CONTENTS PAGE:** Rose Garrard. Casting Room Two; the Bride Stripped Bare 1987, Photo: Dee Berridge Remounted at the Air Gallery London, until December 11

● Performance will be launched in a new format in Spring 1989 as a quarterly journal. Subscribers will be informed about the new arrangements shortly. We hope regular readers will appreciate the new identity of the magazine, which we have reached after careful research.

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NEWS

PERFORMANCE NEWS

+ **Shaun Caton's** exhibition of paintings and drawings alongside performances entitled *Bodies In Days* continues at Central Space Gallery until December 22. *Central Space, 23-29 Faroe Rd, London W14 0EL 01-603 3039.*

+ **Jenny Holzer's** *Messages* are going to be turning up all over the place until February. The **Piccadilly Circus** display sign, **Leicester Square Underground Station**, **National Theatre Sign Board**, **Face Magazine**, **Virgin Megastores till receipts** and others. Presented by Artangel Trust and Interim Art. Through December she will be showing a large scale installation *What Country Should You Adopt If You Hate Poor People?* at the ICA Gallery, London. *Details of outside works: Artangel Trust, 01-439 7220. ICA: 01-930 0493.*

+ **Hull Time Based Arts** have extended their deadline for submissions for small and large scale commissions until **December 14**. Four commissions worth £750 each and one of £4000 are on offer. *Details: H.T.B.A. (Apps), 6 Posterngate, Hull HU1 2JN. 0482 216446.*

ABOUT DIVERSE WOMEN IN TIME

+ is the title of a season of performance, film and video by women artists. Organised by **Hannah O'Shea** it includes **Bobby Baker**, **Carlyle Reedy**, **Anne Bean**, **Silvia Ziranek**, **Tara Babel**, **Nenagh Watson**, **Hannah O'Shea**, **Mona Hatoum**, **Tina Keane**, **Annabel Nicholson** and **Jayne Parker**. Others are to be confirmed. It would be an ambitious programme to mount anywhere but all the more so at Lancashire Polytechnic at Preston which has been very visible in this area of work before. *January 21-29, 1989. Details: 0772 22141.*

+ **The Greatest Show on Earth** is the unimaginative title of a new AfterImage production taken from the festival of alternative circus held in London recently. Presented by Judy Pascoe of Circus Oz it includes **Circus Senso**, **Lumiere & Son**, **Archaos from France**, and **The Shenyang Acrobatic Troupe from China**. *Broadcast: Channel 4, December 21, 10.15 pm.*

ART IN THE DARK

+ is the title of an influential article by Thomas McEvilley, it is also the title of an exhibition at **Chisenhale Gallery, London** organised by **Hannah Vowles** and **Glyn Banks** of **Art in Ruins** fame. There is to be no selection criteria and all entrants who pay their £10 contribution will be included. All media welcome. *Details: S.A.E. to Emma Dexter, Chisenhale Gallery, Chisenhale Rd, London E3. Closing date for submissions: January 10.*

TWO AND TWO

+ The Mickery Workshop in Amsterdam has just published the first issue of a new magazine called **Two and Two**. Published in English it contains a curious mixture of straightforward arts journalism such as the profile **Pierre Audi** who has just been appointed director of the Netherlands Opera, and fiction, such as Mark Longs account of **Vincent van Gogh**. Much of the contents relates to past and current projects by the Mickery and the magazine only narrowly avoids being no more than a house journal. Performance readers will probably find **Pierre-Alain Hubert's plans** for a massive firework spectacular along the **Great Wall of China** the most interesting of all the articles. The amount of money that has evidently gone into producing **Two and Two** makes us at Performance very envious. *Available from Mickery, Herenmarkt 12, 1015 ED Amsterdam, Holland.*

SKEGNESS RESIDENCY

+ **Lincolnshire and Humberside Arts Association** are offering a residency at a secondary school in **Skegness** to anyone working in performance, film or video who lives in the Lincolnshire and Humberside, East Midlands, Eastern or Yorkshire Arts Association regions. The residency lasts from April 17 to May 12 1989 and there is a fee of £1000 plus accommodation available. *Deadline January 26. Details: Jayne Knight, Arts Development Officer, Lincolnshire County Council, County Offices, Newland, Lincoln LN1 1YL. 0522 552222 Ext 2831.*

HOTEL

+ **Marty St James** and **Anne Wilson** continue their investigation of public culture by transforming the **Air Gallery, London** into an

Hotel complete with ballroom, bar, bedroom and bathroom. This will also coincide with the completion of their new video also called **Hotel**, commissioned for Channel 4. *January 18-February 26, 1989. Air Gallery 6-8 Rosebery Ave, London EC1 01-278 7751.*

ICA NEW PERFORMANCE NIGHTS

+ It's been a very long time coming but at last the **ICA** is to recognise a whole range of live work that doesn't fit into their normal theatre or gallery scheduling. **One Monday night each month** is to be devoted to work in progress by established artists and work by lesser known artists. The first of the series, January 9, 1989 features **Bobby Baker**, with *Drawing On A Mother's Experience* and a new work *Chocolate Money*, **Elsie Mitchell** with *She Watches Silently* which she presented as part of the platform at the National Review of Live Art this year, and a new work from **Liz Aggiss** *The Stations of the Angry*. *Artists interested in participating in the series should contact Lois Keidan, ICA Theatre, The Mall, London SW1Y 5AH 01-930 0493.*

LUTON SHOW

+ **33 Arts Centre** in **Luton** is inviting proposals from performance and installation artists for inclusion in forthcoming exhibitions as well as site-specific works in and around Luton. *Details: Adam Geary, 33 Guildford St, Luton, Beds 0582 419584.*

+ **Texture**, the **Glasgow** based performance group are presenting their third show *Such is Life* at **Paramount City** in Glasgow on December 14, 10pm-3am.



NEWS

+ Despite appearing on the **Jonathan Ross** show the **Frank Chickens** are still alive and well and have a new Christmas show, *Club Monkey* at **Watermans Arts Centre** in London until December 30, *Details: 01-568 1176.* ●

+ **Thomas Lisle** has created an intriguing new installation of slides and music for the **City Museum, Stoke on Trent.** *Fish Out of Water* juxtaposes images of fish against aphoristic texts which together develop themes of man out of step with his environment. Until January 8, 1989. *Details: 0782 202173.* ●

VIDEO NEWS Compiled by Nik Houghton

Der Golem is the new video installation by **Simon Biggs.** On show at The Showroom until 23rd December the installation is described as an "illuminated Book of Hours ... created through computerised means" focusing on the Jewish myth of the 'clay-man'. Showing alongside *Der Golem* will be Sharon Morris photographs, *Between Ourselves.*

Gallery times are Weds to Saturday from 1 to 6. The Showroom is at 44 Bonner Road, London E2 (Bethnal Green tube). Tel (01) 980-6636 for further information. ●

+ Still in the East-End **Donald Rodney** will be at the **Chisenhale Gallery** from 18th January 89 to February 18th with new works — including **video-featuring** the **X-ray** as both metaphor and material. The exhibition from this young black multi-media artist also includes an installation work made from X-ray "bricks" dealing with the vulnerability of black-women in their own homes. *Further information from Emma Dexter on (01) 981-4518. The Gallery is at 64/68 Chisenhale Road, London W3.* ●

+ New Tapes now in distribution with **London Video Access** — formerly London Video Arts — include *Medusa* by Kate Meynell, a George Snow compilation and Terry Flaxtons *Worlds Apart.* Meynell's tape, produced under the Arts Council/Eleventh Hour initiative is particularly strong here as the myth of Medusa gets transformed into a contemporary story of bedsit brooding and tragi-comic bitterness, ("Fuck and run like all the rest of 'em", comments Medusa on her mythic lover as she glares at a mirror), while Snow's mini-epics *The Assignment* and *Man Of The Crowd* take similar risks with stories from the past as two Edgar Allen Poe texts are worked into richly textured imagery. Highly recommended. *Tape hire details from LVA at 23 Frith Street, London W1V or phone (01) 734-7410. (Also now available is an updated addition to LVA's 1987 distribution catalogue containing full details and descriptions of tapes in current distribution. The A-4 supplement costs 50p).* ●

+ *Insert* is a new media magazine for Londoners with the current issue covering Autumn 88. A flimsy A-4 Desktop Publishing production the

mag nonetheless has a **useful directory** section on London film/video workshops and further education media courses and a fairly comprehensive listings section. The current issue also has pieces on **Desktop technology, slash 'n' splatter movies** and a basic guide to **film theory.** Published by the **Battersea Media Group** in association with the Clapham-Battersea Adult Education Institute. *Insert* is also on the lookout for contributors for their Spring issue. *Costs 50p and is available from the Media Office, Clapham-Battersea AEI, Latchmere Road, SW11. (Tel 01-223-3681).* ●

+ Quick rewind to October reveals a **Ninth National Video Festival** which, this year, introduced new tapes from **Stakker, Leigh Cox** and the **Pictorial Heroes.** Winner of this year's **TVS Student Prize** was **Greg Loftins** reworking of *Don Juan* — a video drama set in London's Docklands — while **Mike Jones** and **Simon Robertshaws** jokey short, *Taxidriver III*, an "inhouse" pisstake of **George Barber's Taxidriver II** with jerkey reference to the home-video aesthetic, was warmly received. Thumbs up too for **Leigh Cox's** foyer installation with its bizarre animal-people and caged faces. ●

+ **Videofest** is a Berlin-based festival of video-art and installation now in its second year. The organisers — **Videokultur** — are now calling for submissions from tapemakers for work made in 1987/88. Categories include **"Art tapes and tapes about art"** and **"Experimental work"**. They're also on the look out for video installations, performances etc. The festival, largest of its kind in West German, runs from 10th to 21st February. Deadlines for submission of work or proposals is: December 31 for videotapes. *For an application form and further information contact: VIDEOKULTUR, Medienoperative Berlin, Potsdamer Str. 96, D-100 Berlin 30 or phone 030-262-87-14.* ●

+ *A Thoughtful Gaze* is the title to a package of tapes from American video-supremo **Bill Viola.** Put together by **Jez Welsh** of the **Film/Video Umbrella** the package includes the highly praised *Anthem* and an 89 minute work, *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like.* Persistent themes in Viola's art include landscape, animals and religion, elements of which were evident in a Riverside Gallery retrospective of his work a couple of months back which introduced his *Reasons For Knocking At An Empty House* installation piece to UK admirers. (A new piece is expected from Viola in the near future after the artists sojourn to Death Valley earlier this year).

Meanwhile the **Video Umbrella** has also just compiled a selection of new British work, titled *Electric Eyes* for touring. Presented in three sections, *Heads Full Of Noise, The Home Front* and *Border Crossings,* the programme features work made from 1985-88 including tapes from **Sven Harding, Liz Power** and **John Goff.** *Further information on either of these touring programmes from The Film/Video Umbrella, 7 Denmark Street, London WC2H or phone (01) 497-2236.* ●

+ Threatening to be the UK's largest ever video event is **Video Positive 1989.** To be held in **Liverpool** from **February 3rd to the 26th Feb** this showcase for UK, European and American tapemakers offers three weeks of commissioned tapes, lectures, workshops and screenings with commissioned tapes, installation and video-performance and a "video-wall" centrepiece comprising 52 monitors. (Donated by Samcom the "wall" is said to be a state-of-the-art example of "matrix" technology). Works to be shown include new pieces from **Steve Partridge** with *Inter Run,* **Kate Meynell** with *Moonrise* and a joint piece from **Robertshaw/Jones** titled *Great Britain.* Other commissions include *These Are Bodies* by Liverpool's **Closet Media Company, *Desert Island Dread* from **Mike Stubbs,** **Marion Urches** *Distant Drums* and the long awaited *Harvest Festival* from **Andrew Stones.****

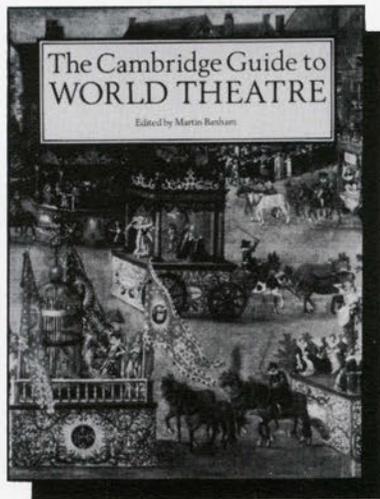
With many of the artists involved also running workshops in the city **Video Positive** looks set to be one of most exciting initiatives of 1989. *Details or contact Video Positive direct at Merseyside Moviola, 40B Bluecoat Chambers, School Lane, Liverpool L1.* ●

+ **Video On The Tube** requires short videos — of between 30 and 60 seconds duration — for screening "between adverts" on the **London Transport Television System at Leicester Square.** Works should have a strong visual content and should not be subject to any copyright restrictions — so forget the s-s-scratch. A small fee will be paid to selected submissions. *Send tapes to Video On The Tube c/o LVA, 23 Frith Street, London W1V or phone Chris Meigh-Andrews on 01-733-2123 or Kate Meynell on 01-359-6985.* ●

+ **Publications on video/film arts** currently available include *Picture This,* a collection of essays/articles on media representation of the arts edited by **Phil Hayward,** and **Mediamatic** and **Independent Media** magazines.

With essays from **Steve Bode** — video column editor at *City Limits* — **John Wyver,** producer of *Channel Fours Ghosts In The Machine* and *State Of The Art* series, and the likes of *Griselda Pollock* *Picture This* is a book offering some timely analysis on the way television and film depict art. Recommended. (Published by John Libbey 1988 — No price given. Softback). Watch out too for issues of **Mediamatic,** a glossy, stylish art'n'media mag from Holland. Past issues have featured long articles on both the UK and European scene and presentation throughout is refreshingly upmarket. Expensive at £3 but well worth it. There are four issues a year. Available at most good art/gallery bookshops. (UK distributor Central Books 01-407-5447). Finally **Independent Media** continues its upward trend as the UK's only independent film/video/photography mag with a mix of reviews, articles and information. Published by Documentary Video Associates the magazine costs £1 with subscription details available from DVA on 0252-545505. ●

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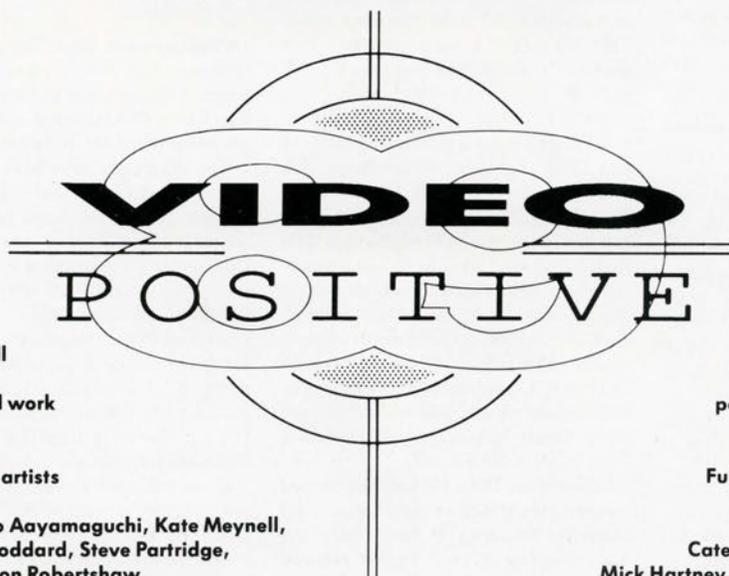


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SHOWING THE WIRES

Station House Opera possess that rarest of all things, a unique vision articulated through a genuinely original theatrical language. Best known for their vertical performances in which people and objects defy gravity, they are rapidly achieving an international reputation as one of the most important new performance groups anywhere. STEVE ROGERS talks to the group's founder Julian Maynard Smith.

Steve Rogers: Julian, how would you describe Station House Opera.

Julian Maynard Smith: Well it's theatre really.

SR: When you say theatre you don't mean plays?

JMS: No, I mean what we do really.

SR: But who else is there that does that sort of work.

JMS: One of the more encouraging things about our career is that we're getting into the festival circuits of Europe which are basically theatre festivals and were performing with people like La Fura Dels Baus and the La La La world tour.

But we've always found a problem in this country of being able to say theatre without people having an idea of what it means, whereas in other countries there is no problem about calling it theatre because it doesn't preclude the idea of performance, it's not such a prejudiced concept. Whereas

here you get into all sorts of trouble if you call it theatre.

SR: Presumably that's because we have no idea of theatre other than a purely literary one.

JMS: I was deeply ignorant of theatre when Station House started. I find that quite an advantage really because I think performance has its own skills but it doesn't have its own inherited formulas for operating which theatre certainly does. For anyone starting working in theatre here, just in order to get the work shown, you have to do it in a certain way. We weren't particularly concerned about having it shown anywhere because we weren't thinking in those theatrical terms. When Station House started I was completely unaware of people like Impact Theatre and Rational and IOU. Really there are two separate groups, I suppose there is some area of mutual interest but they remain theatre in terms of their approach to performing. The way they perform is still acting.

They have a very traditional idea about what an actor was even if the content was very different. It was certainly true of *The Carrier Frequency* which was still fairly theatrical but they were beginning to approach the idea of just doing a job rather than pretending to be a mobster.

SR: Yes, and they had to use a formal device to do that by coming on at the beginning and taking a bow before they perform. It was like saying to the audience "Is this theatre or is this real?"

JMS: I suppose that's what Station House has always done. I've always thought of it as play acting really, playing at acting as much as anything else.

SR: Pretending to act?

JMS: Pretending to act. Yes. So you're actually using a persona rather than character. There is no consistent character running through. But it's not just a body doing a job. That objective idea of performance doesn't really

exist. An audience always reads something fictional into the performance however undramatic you are trying to be. And all those things like costume are always read as fiction as much as anything else and I think you have to take all that on board.

SR: That seems to be an increasingly important aspect of the work. A show like *Cuckoo* for instance, you can understand why people might want to ask who are these people, where do they come from, what's their names. When you say about persona rather than character there is in *Cuckoo* a kind of theatrical realism.

JMS: There isn't a structure to *Cuckoo*. It's made up of sections and each section is made up of a specific concern but they don't fit into an overall pattern. The piece is put together out of lots of different sections and the order of those sections is as much to do with where people happen to be on stage as any sense of an overall continuity. There is a sense of linking but there is no continuity of

looks like a repository of furniture but less like a cute Agatha Christie sort of thing.

SR: To me it looked like early sixties kitchen sink surrealism.

JMS: Set dressing of the worst kind in a sense. A wardrobe there, a carpet there, and you've your horribly dowdy seaside bedsit land. And we really wanted to escape that. But to escape that . . . well, we could have gone for Swedish furniture or something.

SR: It wouldn't have worked.

JMS: Even if we could have afforded it.

SR: You've just been to Switzerland with the show, does it resonate there in the same way?

JMS: One of the technicians there swore he could get us some more just the same. I can't believe they have tatty furniture in Switzerland. Maybe they do.

SR: How many times do you perform in a year, it can't be that many.

you're doing it. And that's what tends to happen if you tour it too much.

SR: When you start working on a show do you have fairly fixed ideas or are they only tentative ideas of what you want to achieve.

JMS: It varies. With *Cuckoo* we started with a sort of programme of things we were going to look at before we started work. But all those ideas were thrown out right at the end. It's strange, because we started off working on *Cuckoo* trying to hold back the time when we would introduce objects. We wanted to just do something about performance and we wanted to keep the heavy objects out. We had just come from doing *Split Second of Paradise* with tons of breeze blocks. We wanted to avoid that and we ended up with tons of furniture and apparatus.

SR: Did *Split Second* start off with the breeze blocks right from the beginning?

JMS: Yes. Sometimes the best piece comes from a happy coincidence of two ideas; one is to do with a material or an image and the other is some sort of conceptual idea about structure. That's how *Split Second of Paradise* came about. We had already done a few workshops and one piece at the Bloomsbury Theatre with breeze blocks so we know there was something about breeze blocks that was interesting. But the conceptual ideas were about the creation of the world and Genesis and there's a structure that follows a sequence of comprehension about the physical world and how to manipulate it. It starts off with a building that's very wobbly and without foundation. In fact it's just like clothes that are built on people. There's a tower that's built on people's knees and then goes to quite gestural things and then goes to things that are quite planned like walls which need to be pre-planned to achieve their final form. That conceptual leap from ad hoc putting things on top of one another to planning is actually quite an important one in history. Originally there was a lot of religion in that show but it all got thrown out, except for God's tirade at the beginning.

SR: There was one image of you falling, was that Satan's fall from heaven.

JMS: I don't know, it was someone getting their comeuppance. That's just because things are double edged and you get the backlash always. I built Jo up from a sitting position into a falling position which was vaguely based on the Sistine Chapel falling into hell image. Then I decided to build a tower and come to save him. Having engineered his fall I magnanimously come and save him.



Natural Disasters
Acme Gallery, London
1980

character.

SR: Is it just that by using familiar furniture you actually set a familiar scene, i.e. rooms in our own homes.

JMS: That's what we really had to fight against. We had real trouble when we first did that show because we hadn't really understood what furniture means to an audience. It's not like a breeze block or taken out of context by hanging it up in the air. It's all very evocative. You just take a random collection of furniture, completely at random, and it's going to look like a set. For the second version of *Cuckoo* we decided to try and minimise that by reducing the number of different types of furniture and multiplying those few types. So we had a multiple of wardrobes and of standard lamps and chairs. So it still

JMS: No, it's not that many at all. That is something we do think about quite a bit. I think there certainly is something in that. We are often not as good at performing the work as we would like to be, but at the same time one can get too good at it.

SR: Become A Performance.

JMS: Yes. It depends very much on what the show is and how conceptual it is and how much about pure performance it is. Not much of our work is about virtuoso performance. So we don't have to be doing it six nights a week to keep it up. We do have to rehearse a lot to get it up to a standard. But we still have to hold back from the point when all the ideas that were behind the performance disappears and it's just about performing. I think that's when the performance dies. You forget why

But then he got up and left me stranded upside down. It could be seen as a parable about power or pride.

SR: So often with *Split Second* so many of the images fire a memory of another image from somewhere else, painting in particular.

JMS: There are certain deliberate things the *Pieta* looks like a *pieta* but a lot of the images don't have any conscious source.

SR: Many of the performances are very demanding of the performers. They ask the performers to take physical risks and are quite tiring. Is this important to the understanding of the work or is that just a necessary process for making the work.

JMS: I'm not sure I agree with you. I don't think every show is dangerous. There is something about the struggle to achieve a fantasy and then being defeated by the reality of one's own apparatus. The whole thing can be seen as a physical metaphor for an imaginary construct.

SR: Is that why there's such an emphasis in the work on verticality and gravity.

JMS: Yes. The verticality came originally from the fantasy of flight. But the sheer mechanics of keeping someone off the ground, sustaining a fantasy, is really hard work. To stop yourself crashing back to reality. That's why all the mechanics are seen and why they are quite low-tech. They're not illusion producing devices such as traditional theatre or film would use.

SR: You can't see the wires?

JMS: If you can't see the wires in our work then the point is lost. It is a struggle. And it's bound to crash to the ground as every fantasy is bound to crash in the end.

SR: Very often the shows are quite cruel to the performers, or rather the performers are cruel to themselves. In *Cuckoo*, for example, Pascal nails himself to the floor.

JMS: Yes, but I think that's quite a reasonable thing to do. While Pascal might or might not like doing that if it becomes quite clearly something that fits into the piece then you have to do it. We tend to try and balance things out. So for every action there's a reaction. Sometimes individuals don't get their revenge. Pascal does end up nailed to the floor but in that piece everyone ends up stuck in one way or another. Even though I may end up in an elevated position (suspended above everyone else) so I might look like I'm above him and he's nailed down there, I'm as stuck as anybody else. I've nailed Bruce to the platform and his weight has taken me upwards but then I'm stuck there, and there's nothing I can do about it. So in a sense you get

your own punishment.

SR: So flying isn't necessarily a liberation.

JMS: No, not in that case. At the end of *Cuckoo* everyone is stuck. Sarah has nailed herself inside the wardrobe, Alison is nailed to the table and chairs, Bruce is nailed to the platform, Pascal to the floor and I'm stuck up against the pulley unable to move. In a sense it's a resolution of the piece.

SR: In *Split Second* there are also events that could be seen as cruel. Piling bricks on the sleeping man, for instance.

JMS: He does that to himself. It's very rare that anyone is overtly horrible to someone else, it's all sly and cunning. There's lots of games being played. You can go to National Theatre and see people being murdered . . .

SR: And it has very little effect, the man piling bricks on himself has much more effect than stage blood because he is actually doing it.

JMS: Yes, he is actually doing it but he's also playing . . . there's always that uneasy difference between 'Is this guy acting or is he actually doing something?'. He's sort of representing something. He's not doing a piece of performance art which involves bashing your head against a brick wall until you fall unconscious. We've never taken anything to the point where anyone's actually hurt, we never actually hurt ourselves except accidentally. Pascal is actually singing while he's doing that and piling on the bricks extinguishes his ability to sing. He's not actually in agony . . . just a minor discomfort.

SR: Part of the essence of your work is the ambiguity of the images you create. Whilst Pascal is piling breeze blocks on himself he hasn't got some special set of breeze blocks which are hollow in the middle or something like they would if it was real theatre. You're saying that it also isn't the endurance work associated with performance art. You're somewhere between the two and that is an ambiguous place to be.

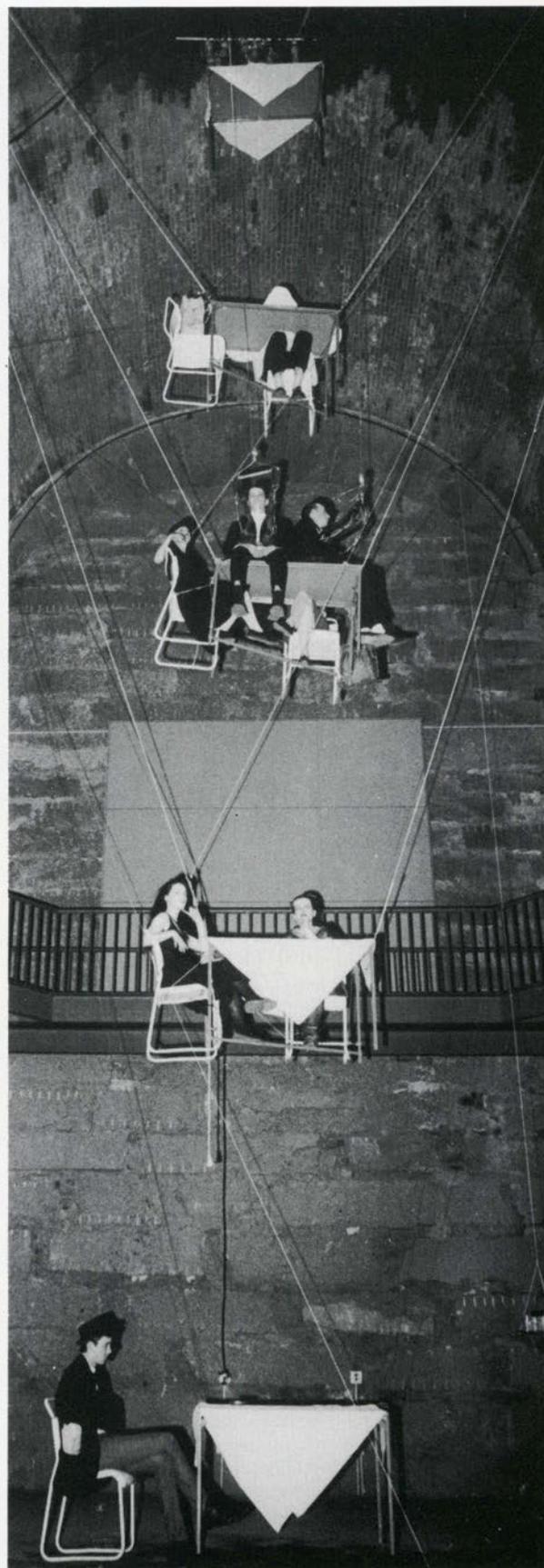
JMS: It's where we want to be.

SR: Do you find that people bring certain expectations . . .

JMS: We get people who are disappointed with the level of violence we inflict on each other. We have no intention of being as macho as Survival Research laboratory, etc which actually is extremely boring.

SR: So it doesn't have a didactic relationship with the world?

JMS: In a sense it comes straight out of minimal work of the sixties and seventies and so in that sense we are post-minimalist. That is where we have come from. I don't really think



Drunken Madness
Brooklyn Bridge, NYC
1983

PHOTO / ROBIN HOLLAND



A Split Second of Paradise
Acme Studios, London
1985

about that phrase too much. There is a sense that we deal with space in much the same way as Glass and Reich dealt with time all those years ago. Also one of the things *Station House* was originally involved with was the idea of liberating the whole area of vision.

I wanted to produce something that had more the spatial qualities of a painting, Italian painting like Tintoretto and Tiepolo in particular, who actually liberated the figure from the ground. In a sense you could actually look at the corners and they are as important as the centre and that's certainly not true of the theatre. I suppose we still work with the proscenium conventions and we do accept the grid up there and we do use the frame. So there's not a hierarchical division of space on the stage.

SR: But is the picture composed at all times? Are you using the Cunningham idea of lots of little separate pictures but with Cunningham the picture is still always composed.

JMS: Recently we've been working with a fairly small company of five people which is a number you can take in at one glance unless they are separated by a wide space. *Split Second* actually works much better on a wide stage so you have to turn your head. But when we worked with eight

people the audience couldn't understand that as a coherent body somehow. Because every performer is performing all the time and there is no hierarchies of importance, we don't have spear carriers. And I think there must be something about perception that you cannot actually accommodate eight people all at once whereas with five you at least know there's five without having to count them but eight is too many to do that with.

SR: And all the performers perform independently don't they?

JMS: We tend to use structures so that there are endless meetings between performers which are choreographed meetings but between those meetings everything is improvised. You know you have to go from A to B and there you will meet somebody and will do a rehearsed bit and then move on. They are quite carefully rehearsed.

SR: Is the structure of the work primarily a pattern of meetings?

JMS: That is one way of seeing it. There is room for developing a performance on your own but you have to agree with other people when you are going to meet with them. It's inevitable, it's not very profound but it does assume that each performer is equally important.

SR: And that they have freedom.

JMS: Within limits. We talk about and agree where and when the meetings take place. And what they will do between meetings; they can't just do what they like.

SR: I often get a feeling at the end of a *Station House* show that, rather like Beckett plays, the only means of behaviour that is open to you is to repeat it all again. That the performers are somehow trapped inside the work.

JMS: We have done performances that are rather loose but I don't think that's true of other works. Something like *Sex and Death* ended on an image which by some means has been turned on its side so you are presented with a top view of the set rather than a side view. That's a resolved image on which to end and it's only when it sinks into the audience's head that that's what's been happening, in fact things have been happening for a while and things end up like that, it allows you to see it from a different point of view and that seems like a good way to finish.

SR: But couldn't you revolve it through another ninety degrees, isn't that almost a part of the sense of it.

JMS: We've never been that formalistic really.

SR: But I mean you never actually leave the set, the performers are just stuck there at the end. And that after the lights go out, if they come on again we might find the performers in some more advanced stage.

JMS: In fact most of the performers are stuck where they are. In *Split Second* three out of the five performers are actually stuck. It's like achieving a final image, you achieve your final fantasy and the consequences of that are for you to imagine. You stop it when you can imagine what has to come next. In reality there is a whole process of disentangling yourself from your predicament in a quite untheatrical sort of way which is sort of interesting as well because it's not a clean end.

SR: You say you have a resolved image at the end, but life isn't like that, is it?

JMS: Oh, I think it is, but it only lasts for a split second. Fantasies are terrific at resolving themselves into perfect images for a split second and then bang, it falls apart. But for the purposes of a performance you cut it at that point and allow the falling apart to take place in real time. As the performers disentangle themselves.

SR: Is that what the audience are intended to think about the personas because they are not resolved, only their relationship to each other and the materials they are using are resolved.

JMS: I don't think persona are there to be resolved.

SR: But they're more than just manipulators of objects, they do actually have a life on stage.

JMS: Yes they do. We certainly resist characterisation, or continuity of narrative. So at any one point the relationship between person and object is as much emotional as physical. Partly because objectivity is impossible there's no such thing as a person just doing a thing. You can't just have a person picking up a teacup without doing it as a dancer or an actor pretending to be someone or you do it as a performance artist pretending to be themselves. That's why I find performance art so difficult to deal with because that question hasn't been resolved or even addressed. The only way that can be resolved in performance art is to make their life their art. Which is something we have not done.

SR: So your life isn't like that. I think we sometimes imagine you going off to your flat to saw up another wardrobe. But I find this whole question of the performers the most interesting. It reminds me of a TV programme I saw about a woman who has no short term memory but in every other respect she is perfectly healthy. The performers react to very mundane materials and objects as though they have not only never seen them before but have no idea what it is.

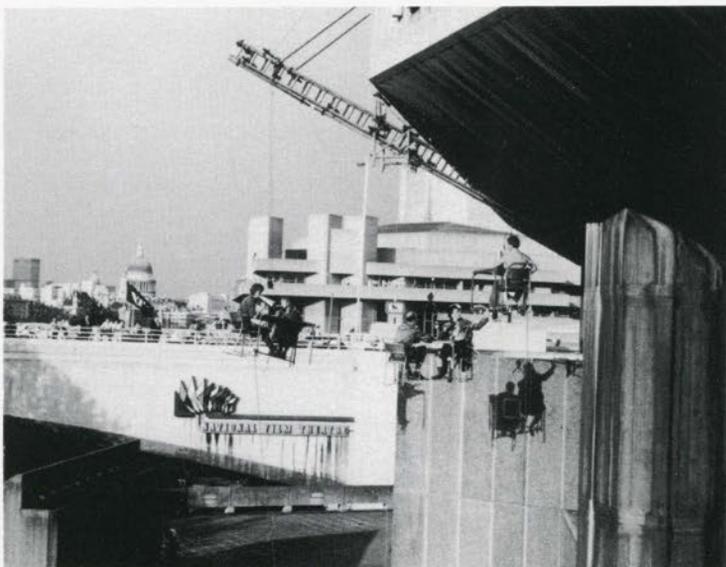
JMS: We used to have an exercise based on that called the five second memory plus very long term things like language. Your response to situations is always having to change. It's extremely difficult.

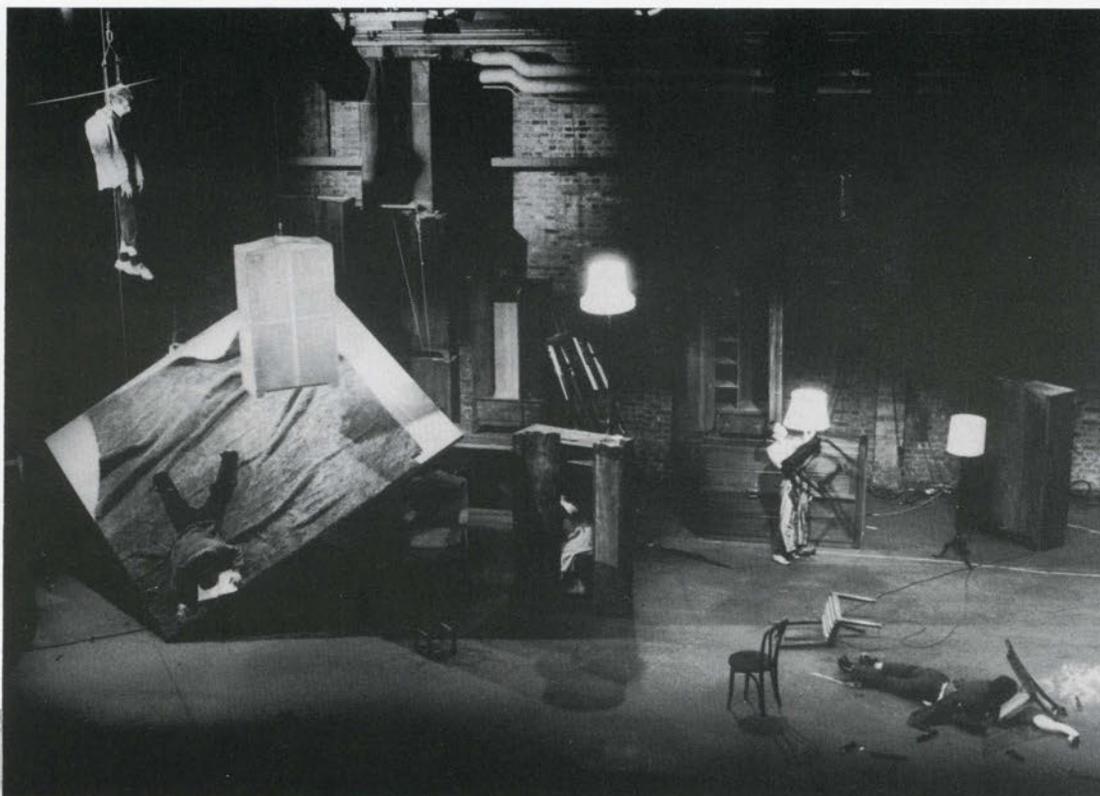
SR: Is there a desire for an original innocence in that. That these people somehow are without sin because they have no memory they can hardly be guilty.

JMS: Yes, maybe, I've never thought of it like that. Much more its been an idea of taking someone out of their context. We always struggle quite hard not to present things in a context. Although you have to always recognise your interdependence on everything around you, in a sense abstract exercises of that nature are quite good as a formal device to take you somewhere you might not have gone really. It takes you somewhere that your own prejudice would not have led you. That's what I thought was interesting about Theatre of Mistakes. It was very formally based but it ends up going somewhere that you didn't want to go. At the same time it didn't address itself to problems of what it looked like to an audience. The costume thing was never resolved



PHOTO / PETER COX

Sex and Death
London, 1982*Piranesi in New York*
Brooklyn Bridge, NYC
1988*Scenes From A New Jericho*
South Bank, London
1984



Cuckoo
Riverside Studios,
London
1988

because the problem of the persona was never resolved.

We are not interested in people whose main interest is in performing. We are not interested in actors. We find most of the members from art schools, through workshops mainly. We are going to be doing a much bigger piece next year and we're going to have to audition really. I don't know how we're going to do that because if you audition you'll get performers. I don't know how we're going to manage to get the right people. We need thirty-five people.

JMS: Is that for La Villette?

SR: Yes.

SR: Thirty-five people, you were worried about working with eight people. What is that show about?

JMS: Well, in a way it's a development from *Split Second of Paradise* but on a much larger scale, a scale that deals with building sized objects. I'm interested in what happens when people start building things that are bigger than themselves. What happens when you build one structure on top of another structure. I don't know how it's going to work because up to now it's been on a fairly human scale. This is a scale from breeze block size up to a house size. There's something interesting about a big object made up of lots of little objects. You can have a house transforming itself into its own staircase so that the house doesn't exist any more. You can

have greed amongst objects. You can have the objects dealing with each other.

SR: Will the performers just become the servants of the objects.

JMS: You can deal with the relationship between the individual and the crowd or the state. And similarly between the individual breeze block and the building. To what extent each of those agree with the other and where disagreements come. Performers at the lower end of the scale but then they will come to agreements with each other to plan and build structures. So if you start with a plan you can carry on building something enormous. So we are going to investigate what happens when you agree to work together.

SR: So it carries on where *Split Second* left off, which got to the point of rationalism in your history of the world.

JMS: Well no, I think we have concurrent strands of rationalism and adhocism. Different ways of thinking about society either in large terms or small terms. Because it is for the French bi-centenary it is nominally based on the image of the breaking down of the Bastille. It is this image of repression and wealth which is smashed to pieces and those blocks are used to build other things. So we will start with a sort of palace, one image where all the wealth resides. The impoverished masses are homeless,

which was actually the case in pre-revolutionary France. I'm not sure if this piece has a resolution either. At one point we thought we might end up with a egalitarian, modernist, Corbusien five little villas or something. But in fact I don't think anything is as simple as that.

SR: Yes that's a little too utopian for the 1980s really.

JMS: We might get to the point where we have a Corbusien villa cropping up somewhere, but at the end I'm not sure. But it lasts nine days so we'll see when we get there. At points there will be more working on it than at others so there will be a production cycle.

SR: The French are more architecturally literate than we are so should be able to read it more easily.

JMS: They're also more intellectually literate. ●



PHOTO / DANIEL FAORO

THE TIME HAS COME, THE WALRUS SAID . . .

SIMON PENNY looks at art practice in the age of the thinking machine.

**WA-WA-WALT DISNEY MEETS
MA-MA-MAX HEADROOM**
IT IS RUMOURED that prior to Walt Disney's optimistic incarceration in liquid nitrogen he recorded enough footage of himself speaking to the camera, that the frames could be assembled into any collection of words. The rumour continues that the material is now transferred to video disc and that Walt Disney now addresses board meetings from his icy repose.

*Full fathom five thy father lies,
of his bones are coral maja
Cgiping of him doth remain
but has suffered a sea change
into something rich and strange.*

OF HOMUNCULI AND ANDROIDS ...

One Saturday afternoon in late 1987 I saw two programmes about robots on TV, a movie and a sit-com. The first concerned an archetypal metal and blinking lights robot which (albeit accidentally) attained human style consciousness. In the second, two little girls played the parts of the primitive and more advanced versions of a little girl robot. (The pantomime horse syndrome). The first had limited understanding of the world and mechanical sounding speech, the second was indistinguishable from a 'real' little girl, a bit of a smart aleck.

The AI (artificial intelligence) debate has demonstrably hit popular culture, the treatment was banal but its significance is not. When the popular media is able to present various models of machine intelligence, more or less human like, the issue is a cultural reality. Visionary fiction is always a step ahead of fact, but when the fiction is discussing the emotional characteristics of machine intelligences, we can be assured that machine intelligence itself is an accepted reality.

Stories of the desire to replicate people by other than the usual genetic means are remarkably pervasive in human history, and this is surprising, given the surplus of real ones, and the relative ease of making them in the usual way. Sci-fi writing and film has presented us with a full range of permutations on this theme. A brief history and taxonomy of these efforts both in fiction and object fact, might include:

Galatea and Pinocchio: the frustrated craftsman and the benevolent god syndrome.

Golem and Homunculus: the creation of an organic 'little man' through appropriate mystical and alchemical observances.

The full blown mechanical automata: From Hero of Alexandria, via the golden tree full of mechanical songbirds in the palace of Baghdad, to the mechanical animals and people of Vaucanson and Jaquet Drosz. 'Probably the most famous automaton of all time was Vaucanson's Canard (1738). This animal possessed a fidelity in the imitation of organic functions which surpassed any machine built to that time. Descriptions of the duck give it the ability of moving its body, flexing its wings so that all the feathers work in unison, quacking, drinking water, eating grain, excreting the results — all in perfect mimicry of the living animal. Situated on a great pedestal which housed an imposing mechanism, Vaucanson's creation actually underwent some of the cruder processes of digestion. The Canard was an attempt to produce more than the outward features of an organism.'¹

Dr Frankenstein's monster occupies a crucial position here, firstly in that as a union of the organic and the technological, he is a modern homunculus, and the good doctor a modern alchemist, but also because he was written by a woman.

THE MECHANICAL BRIDE

The makers of pseudo-people (robots, automata etc) have traditionally been men, both in this century and before. One might explain this in terms of general patriarchal domination of all fields, but another attractive explanation is the idea of a compensation for the lack of a womb. According to Feminist theory it is a characteristic of Patriarchal culture that it attempts to totally control the 'other'. Can we not see robot manufacture in this light as the creation of a totally controlled and artificial ('ideal') other?

The term Robot was coined by Karal Capek in his play *R.U.R. (Rossums Universal Robots)* in 1921. It comes from a Czech word meaning forced labour and implies a lack of autonomy and free will. His robots were not mechanical men but androids, machines that appeared human.

More recently, with the advent of micro-electronics and sci-fi movie effects have allowed the continued development of three more defining categories:

C3PO, a descendant of the girl android in Fritz Langs' *Metropolis*, illustrating what could be called the pantomime horse syndrome;

R2D2, the cute Dalek, out of 'lost in space' by Dr Who. Thirdly, the 'superbrain';

Hal and Deep Thought, which manifest human style intelligence, but are more modern in that they do not defer to the naivete of simplistic anthropomorphism. They incorporate expert systems thinking and the lessons of the Turing test, (see below).

One must not neglect the wonderful Max Headroom. Most amusing about Max is that he is a fake. A rubber mask and some clever editing and colourizing. Fiction is again way ahead of reality. But we want to love Max because he's so human, he has wit, he

has cynicism, and yet he has the database at his (digital) fingertips (viz his citing of instantaneous ratings). But he is not a synthetic man. We know his genealogy, in true British BBC tradition he is a Dalek, something that purports to be organic, preserved in electronics. (The Daleks in fact contained BBC employees on tricycles). As Dr Frankenstein's monster served as a focal point for the depersonalizing effects of the industrial revolution; As the robots in R.U.R., half man, half machine, provided a middle ground on which to focus an examination of the relationship between man and machines, so Max serves the same function with respect to the digital.

THE TURING TEST

In 1950, Alan Turing asserted that machine intelligence was possible and would be a reality by the year 2000. He also proposed what is now referred to as the Turing Test to gauge whether the machine has reached human consciousness. It is the essence of simplicity: connect a person and a computer by teletype to a human examiner. If the examiner cannot tell the difference after a series of questions on any subject, the computer has

achieved the goal. This test in fact, would prove that the machine was more intelligent than the person, for it would have to mimic human error and slowness at calculation.

This test is telling in its anthropocentricity, the implication being that human intelligence is the epitome of possible intelligences, which belies its ultimate grounding in Christian theology. This test also implicitly asserts that consciousness is a linear phenomenon, that degree of consciousness can be measured like a test of strength, the hammer and bell game at old country fairs. But consciousness is demonstrably a vector phenomenon and machine intelligence already far exceeds human ability in some fields. This would seem no more difficult to accept than the fact that John likes cricket while Mary likes basketball, but to some, the idea that a machine might be better at some aspects of 'intelligence' is intensely threatening.

THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

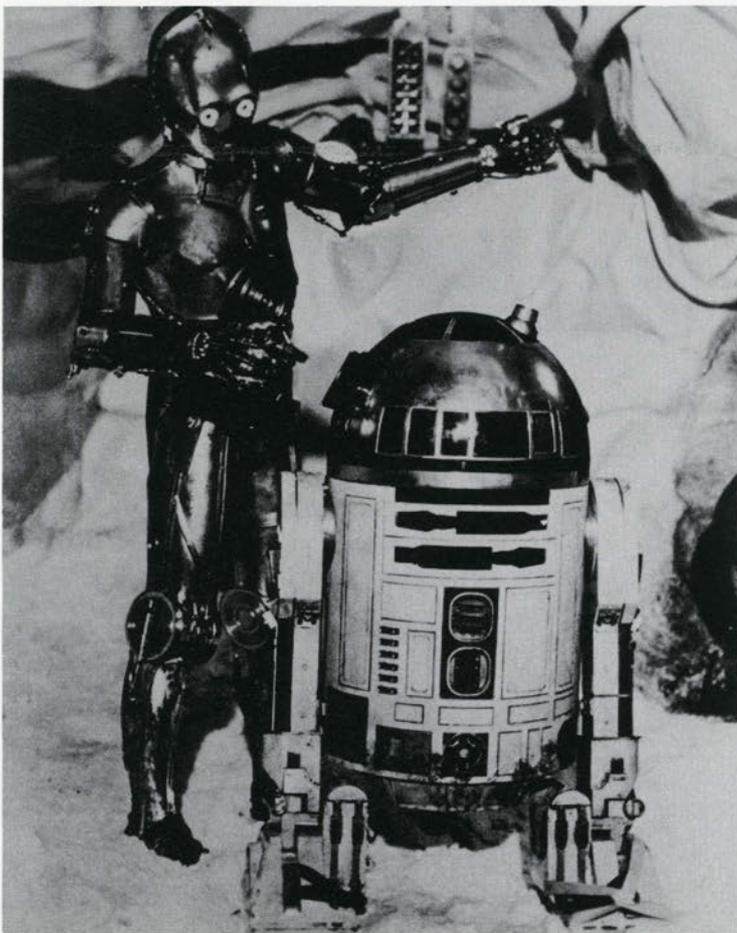
Since the Industrial Revolution, technological development has been a (one might be tempted to say 'the') major force for change in Western

society. In our era that force has been focused on electronics and in particular, logic electronics.

Not only is this technology integral and integrated into every aspect of our lives, but it has generated about it a power structure, and also an immense social mythology. This mythology has been the subject of examination in literature, cinema, and drama. Why is it then that artists tend to avoid engaging this major aspect of our culture? Perhaps it threatens the artists' mode of production. Since William Morris made a claim for the 'craft' process, itself defined in opposition to the process of mechanical mass production, art practice has aligned itself with this position. Only relatively recently with the multiples of Les Levine and others, have artists addressed the process of mass production, but without major effect on the art market, which still clings doggedly to the idea of the unique precious object. Interestingly, writers made a successful adjustment to the condition of mass production centuries ago.

But the rift goes deeper than this. In attempting to engage the science/technology complex; (which is the territory of the dominant paradigm of our culture); the artist is presented with a powerful paradigm which is at odds with the artists conventional procedures. I have argued elsewhere² that the roots of this difference can be traced to the realignment of science with commerce, and away from 'art' at the beginning of the industrial revolution, which led to 'art' (along with religion) defining itself in opposition to 'science'. This stance has led to the spectre of the losing battle for creationism and other articles of the faith, and (until recently) of the increasingly hard line positions of those arguing for rationality, and for non-rationality. There is some indication that these positions are softening, as is indicated by J.D. Bolter, who himself is simultaneously a scholar of classical culture and a computer scientist, and argues against this split:

'My premise is that technology is as much a part of classical and western culture as philosophy and science and that these "high" and "lowly" expressions of culture are closely related. It makes sense to examine Plato and pottery *together* in order to understand the Greek World. Descartes and the mechanical clock together to understand Europe in the C17th + 18th. In the same way it makes sense to regard the computer as a technological paradigm for the science, the philosophy, even the art of the coming generation. Perhaps from this premise we can establish a much needed



R2D2 and C3PO share a joke

dialogue among scientists, engineers and humanists.³³ It is certainly true that the Automaton of Vaucanson and Jaquet-Droz excited the imagination of their time in a similar way that the computer excites the popular imagination today. They were to have a direct effect on the thinking of la Mettrie as earlier clockwork inspired the mechanistic notions of Descartes.

The first attempt by artists to engage the scientific/industrial complex was that of the Futurists, but by and large they discussed it within the traditional media, with Russolo standing as an innovator among them. Bugatti, on the other hand, seemingly embraced the expostulations of Marinetti (after his baptism in industrial waste), so literally that he abandoned the gallery object completely and opted for motor car production.

Although conventional wisdom centres the Kinetic art movement of the sixties on the idea of motion per se, I would suggest that its true focus was an attempt to circumscribe the condition of 'machineness'. Why did it take so long for the machine to be brought in from the cold? Perhaps because as the art object epitomises artifice; and the machine is a further level of synthesization (even the materials it is made from are themselves synthetic, artifice); the notion of machine art implied a 'second order' artification. The aesthetic of the machine had until that time been located outside 'fine art' in a category similar to that of craft or folk art.

BACHELOR MACHINES

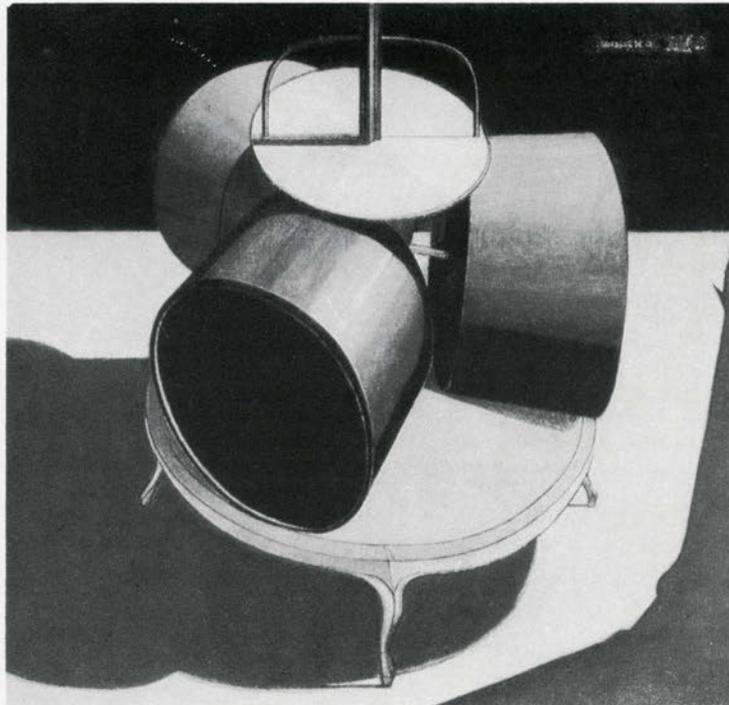
Between these two only a few artists addressed the condition of the machine, among them Duchamp and Picabia. As Jack Burnham reminds us, when Duchamp employed the bicycle wheel in a readymade, it was not a technologically nostalgic gesture, but state of the art technology. 'From a practical standpoint, the Readymade bicycle wheel was an apt choice. Only a few years before Duchamp's appropriation it had been mechanically perfected. The ball bearing mounted axle and tension wire spokes made the bicycle wheel one of the lightest and most elegant devices then in common use. . . . The lightweight wheel, the chain drive, the tubular frame construction made the bicycle, along with the automobile, revolutionary forms of personal transportation.'³⁴

Burnham later goes on to say: 'More than any artist previously, Duchamp confronted the psychic and practical difficulties of realizing a viable motorized art. A Kinetic art, somehow, presented a contradiction in terms. As a sculptural totem, the

machine was unassailable. Yet to function in actuality, and artistically, it had to be injected with imprecision and irrationality. Then, perhaps, it could begin to live, in doubt and indecision, as human beings do. . . .' (Significantly, here Burnham reinforces the old dualism, allowing humans the qualities of 'imprecision and irrationality'. Once again we define ourselves in terms of; in opposition to; our technology) ' . . . Most revealing is the fact that Duchamp, according to Lebel, regarded himself as an "unfrocked artist" after his art became

microelectronics became a consumer item with the introduction of the transistor; saw exploration into the relationship between logic technology and art making with such landmarks as the *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition, curated by Jasia Riechart; and the publication of Jack Burnham's *Beyond Modern Sculpture*.

Cybernetics, the invention of mathematician Norbert Wiener, was concerned with communication between systems, and made no implicit distinction between organic-organic communication, electronic-electronic



Marcel Duchamp
Chocolate Grinder No. 1
1913

centred around the Rotoreliefs. No longer dealing with the gentle illusionism of painting, nor even the leverage of Dada's tools (irony, fallibility, and repetition), Duchamp realized that he had placed himself on the brink of raw technology. Such a situation demanded that one either draw back or plunge into a rational world if impersonally controlled effects. He chose to do the former.³⁵

It is on the edge of this world of impersonally controlled effects that we once again find ourselves, only this time we must not back away. To do so would be to relinquish any right to affect the development of contemporary technology, which is all the more powerful for its ability to think.

. . . OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM,
AND THINKING MACHINES . . .
The late sixties; about the time that

or electronic-organic. This pioneering work was confirmed by his cybernetic diagnosis of the neurological condition 'ataxia' as being a disruption of feedback loops. One of the dictates of Cybernetics was that intelligence is not inherent in things, but is rather a value we ascribe to systems that appear to operate in a way we can understand as being directed to some purpose.

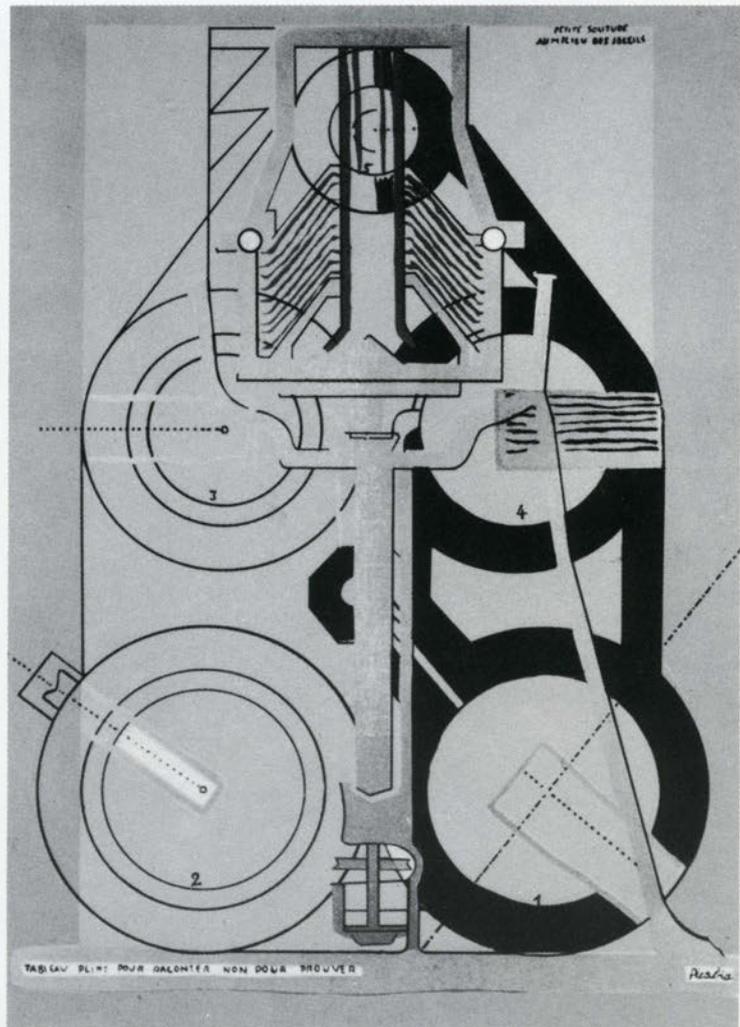
It is easy to be critical, twenty years on, of the theoretical shortcomings of the *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition. Hampered by a complete lack of historical context the works of that landmark event are characterized by an arduous scientism and a mindset that found 'artness' in the more or less arbitrary translation/transduction of one phenomena into another (music into image etc) and the utilisation of chance operation. These operations were regulated by a rigid and simple structure (algorithm). There is

something in the conceptual mindset of these technicians-become-artists that smacks of a familiar unhealthy didacticism, characteristic of people attempting to justify art practice in terms of profit. Some of the essays read like marketing projects for scientific research: this device has potential application in psychological testing; or :‘it represents the first steps towards developing a language of graphics in motion’.⁶

In *Beyond Modern Sculpture* Burnham embraces Cybernetic theory and builds around it a new model of art practice, which he develops in a later essay *Systems Aesthetics*. He argues that in-as-much as mimesis has always been the concern of sculpture, from the caveman to early modernism, anthropomorphic robotry is the logical successor to that tradition in sculpture and argues that the automata of Vaucanson and Jaquet Drosz are significant predecessors of this trend. ‘It is doubtful if non anthropomorphic sculpture can exist. Since the creation of the first non objective and Constructivist sculptures in the early part of the twentieth century, artists have consistently denied the anthropomorphic and mimetic content of their works. Each successive generation of nonobjective . . . sculptors has accused the previous generation of anthropomorphism . . . What we will examine as Cyborg or post kinetic art is really the first attempt to simulate the structure of life literally. Thus, sculpture seeks its own obliteration by moving toward integration with the intelligent life forms it has always imitated.’⁷

I would like to compare this statement with a description of the Cybernetic project by Bolter: ‘Wiener compared the new electron tubes to neurons and wanted to subsume the study of both under one discipline. Wiener’s outlook was clearly as much influenced by pre-electronic control devices (feedback loops in various machines) as by the digital computers just being built . . . Those following Wiener’s approach spoke of creating artificial brain cells and neural networks and allowing the machine to learn as a baby was presumed to do, . . . But the theory of neural networks, which was developed mathematically, met with little or no practical success . . . Specialists more or less gave up the idea of building a machine which would mirror the elements of the human brain, they no longer demanded a literal correspondence between man and machine.’⁸

As Wiener’s vision of Cybernetics was coloured by his training in the pre-electronic electro-mechanical systems, so Burnham is fixated on the idao of



anthropomorphism; his vision of sculpture had not the perspective of interactive games for the home computer. Anthropomorphism is not implicit in that ‘integration’. To juxtapose Burnham and Bolter again: ‘Without the advantages of cybernetics Tinguely has come closest to “humanizing” the machine. A precise definition of “human” is elusive. It is not an extension of the anthropomorphic precision which characterizes the automata collection at Neuchatel. Rather, to be “human” is to expose oneself through animal vulnerability and fallibility. Standing alone in a room, one of Tinguely’s metamechanical works appears nakedly subject to the whims of the gods — like the standing male nudes of archaic Greece, the kouroi.’⁹

‘The artificial intelligence specialist is not interested in imitating the whole man. The very reason he regards intelligence (rational problem solving) as fundamental is that such intelligence corresponds to the new and compelling qualities of electronic technology. Today, as before, technology

determines what part of the man will be imitated.’ And later: ‘The scientist or philosopher who work with such electronic tools will think in different ways from those who have worked at ordinary desks with paper and pencil, with stylus and parchment or with papyrus. He will choose different problems and be satisfied with different solutions.’¹⁰

Burnham seems not to allow that the relationship between people and the environment they create is symbiotic. That one can and should ‘humanize’ machines, but that people should not mechanize. Whereas Bolter makes this symbiotic adaption a basic premise. Of course, as previously mentioned, there is a grand social phobia towards this possibility of mechanisation, and gave rise to the power of the Luddites, Dr Frankenstein’s monster et al; it was the same fear which brought Norbert Wiener tumbling down from the pinnacles of fame (shades of the Inquisition).

My suspicion is that this all creeps up on us while we’re asleep anyway: who worries about our dependance on the

Francis Picabia
*A little solitude amidst the
suns (A picture painted to
tell and not to prove) 1919*

global computerised telephone network, or that because of pocket calculators nobody can do mental arithmetic anymore?

WHITHER ART?

It seems timely to re-examine the Kineticist programme, and the Cybernetic initiatives, in the light of contemporary developments.

The technology has progressed at lightning speed, and its cultural position has changed as rapidly. All the power of an Eniac with its rooms of vacuum tubes and relays is now mass produced and hand held, the price has miniaturized along with the size. Sci-fi dreams (and nightmares) like home computers and computer banking are now somewhat tedious facts of life. Sophisticated electronics now appears in consumer goods, digital watches are disposable, free in the bottom of your cornflakes.

With the advent of 'user friendliness' the technology is almost always a little black box, with 'in' and 'out' plugs and variables to adjust. More or less compatible user friendly units. It is no longer necessary, nor is it possible, to understand the mechanics of the device in order to use it. Nor are the mechanics amenable to visual understanding as in the case of the Kinetic work. Whereas gears, pulleys and levers have a certain accessible visual logic to them, the IC chip does not. We can experience the effects of the technology, but not its mechanics.

Gone are the days of the ham radio operator winding his own coils, gone is the necessity to be a technician. The arduous scientism of the *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition is also no longer relevant. Electronics has moved out from the research labs into the amusement arcades. No longer sci-fi, it is now a consumer commodity.

Where are the models for art practice in this realm? The first that comes to mind is that of Nam June Paik. His strategy was to orchestrate the symbolic defeat of the technocracy by transmuting its tools, defeating its image. (I refer to his magnetic distortion works and others in similar interactive vein). On reflection, although the political activism of agitating for interactive and public access TV is laudable; Paik's procedure is remarkably shamanistic, reminiscent of sticking pins in voodoo dolls.

Another approach is that of Stelarc, whose idea of the 'obsolete body' will be familiar to readers of *Eyeline*. In an interview in the November issue he summed up his position in two statements: 'What's philosophically and physiologically interesting for me is that technology seems to be welcomed by the body. In other words, if

technology is miniaturized, and packaged in an inert material, the body acts as if the technology is not even there', and earlier '... technology at this point is merely a tool in the process of post-evolutionary development.'¹¹

There is of course plenty of room for art practice in all areas to function as a polemical tool, and certainly these two artists do demonstrate a procedure for actually utilising technological items in art production, whilst avoiding technological fetishism. Two major distinctions are necessary here: Firstly, it is important to distinguish between an attitude to technology per se, and a strategy for utilisation of technology in art practice. Secondly, there is a difference between devising new tools and ways of manipulating a new medium; and the work of producing artwork with those tools. This distinction is often ignored or glossed, as it was in *Cybernetic Serendipity*; and the former is inadvertently lumped in with the latter.

Twenty years ago, pioneer electronic artist, James Seawright, offered a critique on art practice in a technological context. His words remain as valid now as they were then: 'If you start with a conventional definition or concept of an effect or phenomenon and design back from that towards the means necessary to get it, all too often you end up with a machine or a device which produces effects. You may be able to distort or deform the thing into some structural or visual suggestion of sculpture, but the integration of form and behaviour, if present, will be sheer accident. I do think it possible to consider the processes and principle of technology as a medium for art just as validly as a conventional artist might consider wood, stone, bronze, paint on canvas, etc., and all the old precepts about understanding the nature of the medium, etc., are just as true here.'¹² ●

1. Jack Burnham, 'Beyond Modern Sculpture' *George Brazillier 1968*, p199.
2. Simon Penny, 'New Territory . . .' *Artlink Magazine*, March 1988.
3. J.D. Bolter, 'Turings Man', *Pelican 1986*, xvi.
4. *BMS*, p227.
5. *BMS*, p230.
6. 'Cybernetic Serendipity', a *Studio International special issue*, ed Jasia Reichart, 1968, p65.
7. *BMS*, p332.
8. *TM*, pp192-3.
9. *BMS*, p245.
10. *TM*, p213.
11. *Eyeline Magazine*, November 1987, p8.
12. *BMS*, p359.



PLAYING WITH RICHARD SCHECHNER

Last year **SIMON THORNE** and **PHILLIP MACKENZIE**, collectively known as **Man Act**, had an unexpected opportunity to work with Richard Schechner. The following is an extract from the recordings they made of the five day experiment.

IN THE AUTUMN of 1987 Man Act was touring in America. We were playing *Miracles* and at the same time we were casting around for material that was to become *Radio Sing Sing*. There was one gig we were particularly looking forward to. Not a gig really — we were going to spend ten days in the country about twenty miles out of Philadelphia, at the Yellow Springs Institute. We had accepted the invitation to participate in a residency and had asked if while we were there we could meet someone. Who would we like to meet? We had only read his books and seen pictures of his work but we wanted to meet Richard Schechner.

We imagined we would probably sit and talk for two or three days with this man who had all the information about theatre, and then perhaps we'd talk about our new show and then perhaps we'd do a bit of work on it. His work with the Performance Group makes him something of a grandfather (excuse the expression) in experimental theatre. We imagined this meeting would be some kind of holy process. In fact it did not turn out to be holy at all.

He agreed to come for five days with one condition — whatever we did, he wanted to perform. He arrived with notebooks, tapes and slides, recordings from New Guinea and from the birth of his son. In five days we made a performance together. Everything went into a big pot, we stirred it around and threw it out again. It was much less sacred — which is not to say that it was disrespectful, it wasn't that at all, just that it was much freer, much less pressured and perhaps more playful than we could have imagined.

PHILLIP MACKENZIE: It's the first time I've worked with a man of a different generation, with anybody of a different generation.

RICHARD SCHECHNER: Do you like working with a younger person?

P.M.: I just imagined for some reason it would be very different and could be a bit difficult.

R.S.: Difficult — in what way?

P.M.: Because I guess I imagine what it would be like if I worked with my father. I imagine older people to be more stuck — this is the way it's done, or this is the way I've always done it and I don't see why I should change now.

R.S.: I've been in different situations but never this one. I've been in many situations where the focus of the pyramid has been on me — that's what it means to be a director or an author and I have to come up with something or at least I think I have to come up with something. Here it was not that way. Here we're just three of us and none was the leader and things slipped back and forth. I felt very released from having to give all the answers. After all there are two other guys — they can give the answers.

SIMON THORNE: I remember the way we managed to introduce ourselves to each other over a series of bizarre telephone conversations, trying to grasp what your work is. Then meeting here and the ways we have chosen to introduce ourselves here, by performing the work we have and you by inviting us into your snapshot album. Then using that initial meeting as the source material for the play that has taken

place. It's been a very specific project to create a piece of work from a simple collision of experience, without conceptualising it in any sense.

R.S.: In 1972 I went to New Guinea. I'm a great collector. Not because I like to collect, but because I feel for me or somebody else some of this memory might prove useful. So I collected a lot of things — slides, tapes and so on, and nothing ever happened to these things. Then you called and said you were in a tent in New Guinea and this was your new piece. I just said I'll bring this stuff. The pressure's off for finishing something, therefore we played and the play has been good.

P.M.: The only place we could start from was what we did on the floor.

R.S.: I think it would have been a dishonest thing to explore the new in the amount of time given while it's quite an honest thing, out of these albums, your pieces, my work to see what information came out. It's epic, it's from birth to death, it's a joke — but it's a true joke.

S.T.: And its means are very straightforward and simple — I like that.

R.S.: Yes, I like that too. I don't feel from either of you any kind of phoniness, just playfulness, which is good. In the west it's one of the endangered species — adult play. But in certain cultures play and work are the same word in which the work of the gods is also sacred play. In Hinduism it's called Lila, Ramlila is the sport or play of Rama. At the level of meaning it can be very profound — but at the level of experience it's delightful. In other words what makes humans most extraordinary is our

ability not only to play, but to play in our playing, to be aware of our playing. Obviously other primates play but you feel they get lost in their play or they are just their play; they become pure play. We do that, but also we become reflexive — we see ourselves seeing ourselves. If there's a mystery there's a mystery beyond trying to be mysterious. If there's a ritual there's a ritual beyond trying to be santimonious and if there's a deep meaning it's beyond trying to look for deep meanings.

P.M.: I would like to say what you have introduced into our work is much broader paintstrokes, perhaps more playful, freer, a bit less self-conscious. That's what your flavour is whereas we have a tendency towards something much finer, enclosed, elegant.

S.T.: Also, I'd say a healthy irreverence. I think that's probably something we have offstage out of performance — the way we view the work we are making — but in terms of the construction of work, probably because we are still learning the process for ourselves we have a slightly reverential attitude to what we present.

R.S.: This is interesting because people who read me or have a sense of me from the late 60's and mid 70's, especially second hand, extract its seriousness, but miss its demystification.

P.M.: But it is very hard to articulate that aspect of the work when you record it in photographs and on paper.

R.S.: It is harder to, because irreverence as it were, or what I call the trickster, because I'm a trickster, is an essence, therefore it evaporates. Essence, meaning like a perfume. You can only smell it at its moment of existence. A tragedy is a tragedy for ever. A joke is not a joke unless it's in the telling.

S.T.: Working in Europe with a very particular set of traditions and role models, and then coming to America where the work speaks of American culture — American culture seems to have a certain irreverent attitude, a looseness which is not there in Europe. Europe is much more self-conscious in that sense. We are able to come here and share basic techniques of working vocabulary and they are not sacrosanct.

R.S.: But what I like about your work is your precision. In other words we shouldn't confuse looseness with either do as we damm well please or lack of precision. It's more like the crack in the mirror which refracts a different reflection, but is still a crack. You have to know how to crack the mirror or where to crack the mirror. I

do enjoy very much your sense of precision and I enjoy that also in the people that I in a certain sense had some effect on — Spalding Gray, and Liz LeCompte and people like that who also move towards a great deal of precision even though the surface may be broken in many places.

S.T.: I think the background that we're coming out of maybe has become very formalist in its sense of precision and so the techniques of this kind of theatre exist purely for themselves. Ultimately this produces a very sterile piece of work.

R.S.: Right. I think that all ages are like waves — they come and they go. I think this particular wave of formalism that arose in the mid 70's and continues — I think it's passing. I think people are needful of two other things: One — content. They want to know not only that a piece looks good but what does it refer to. Signifier is fine but what does it signify? And secondly: as a teacher I always come

'I don't think art is about centering. I think its about decentering. I don't think its about finding the personality but recognising multiple personalities.'

into contact with young people. Being a teacher is like being a printing press. You constantly print and the paper keeps changing. If you are a good teacher you're going to change what's on the printing wheel. You can let the paper press back on you. But at least the paper is basically the same age. I passed through a period in which people were basically passive. They wanted to take care of themselves only. They were frightened, they were withdrawn. Now people are perking up and they are a little more restless. They make more demands and I feel that goes along with increased meaning. They want to know not only how to do it but what am I doing it for, why am I doing this?

P.M.: I guess it's got to do with

generosity. I get the feeling here there's a greater possibility to be generous. I think that's something we address ourselves to more and more as performers; how generous one is with an audience. Sometimes I feel that perhaps it's about learning how to keep that precision but also to give more.

R.S.: Well, I guess for me that pure formalism suffers from the same thing as the proscenium theatre and pure naturalism. Pure naturalism and pure formalism share the fact that the audience doesn't exist and doesn't need to exist. And popular entertainment, whether it's good or bad, in other words whether it's a television evangelist or wrestling or whether it's a good piece of art, or what have you, demands a kind of interaction with its spectators. That's a dangerous art because you can be extremely exploitative or you can be extremely pandering or you can enter into an actual relationship in which both parties can grow and develop. That to me is where ritual dramas in other cultures and our own work, especially if we're involved in live performance, can make some real headway, where a number of small groups can be a kind of popular entertainment and have real relationships with real audiences, real people.

S.T.: A lot of work in Europe at the moment has become very self-reflexive in one sense.

R.S.: Well, that's true here also. I just feel a stirring, a breaking out. I think one of the interesting things we have done is this; what I would call inter-textuality, in a certain sense brushing against the text. If you think, we have New Guinea, we have personal life, we have prior theatrical pieces that you've composed, we have our own interactions for these days which are very real immediate things. And that these texts which were not meant to be together do go together, that I find extremely important and interesting because I do feel that, slowly but surely, in addition to the individual impulses we have, and in addition to specific cultures, we have a not unhealthy world communication network. That's why I am hopeful about the co-existence of the personal, the ethnic and the pan-global. I think that artists have to investigate those relations without blurring them, but using them together; not surrendering to an absent authority as if you use somebody else's play text or musical text, not being playful in arranging these three levels: the ethnic and then above it the pan-global and underneath it the extremely personal, and letting the spectator see that you're being playful with them.

S.T.: The ethnic is a very

difficult element to work with — to use it honestly.

R.S.: Correct, but the ethnic is also our own ethnic. In that sense Australian, American, Jewish, British, we are already displaced to a certain degree — placed and displaced. Even here we're sitting out in this countryside but it's nobody's home. In other words it is itself another displacement which allows for this interaction and we're of course ambivalent about it. I'll tell you a demystifying thing. I don't think art is about centering. I think it is about decentering. I don't think it is about finding the personality but recognising multiple personalities.

Let's talk for a moment about the slight discomfort you suggest

very confident about your place to be able to laugh. You can be serious and alert but laughter undercuts your alertness, and it's an extremely visual reaction. Sobbing is also another one, but it's easier to make people laugh than sob — I imagine few tragedies are able to do that.

I want it really clear, when I talk about popular entertainments I don't mean some of the imitations that people do — cheap circus acts, people coming out and juggling, people who are just not any good at what you can see street performers and circus performers do very well. I'm talking about the deep popular entertainments of a culture. In American culture we're talking about sports, we're talking about pornography, we're talking

think that's very nourishing — to be conscious of that and make more connections to that and to turn that soil, constantly turn that soil.

JOHN CLAUSER: (Director, Yellow Springs Institute) It's that underlying humming of the vernacular, I think.

R.S.: That's a great phrase — the underlying humming of the vernacular.

P.M.: It's such a pleasure to have that sound of laughter come from an audience because you realise we're in the same place.

R.S.: And playing. Because one of the meanings of the word play is like you say the fishline has play in it. It means it can go this way or that way, it's not established exactly, it's a

'It fascinates me that there is a big to-do about pornography but you can go to any small southern town, you can go to the video shop and you'll find a little corner where you'll have all these tapes. I assume that the same people who listen to the fundamentalists are also renting these tapes . . . they are big business.'

European audiences feel with the idea of entertainment.

S.T.: I think we are talking about a very particular kind of work.

P.M.: Our sort of work is dubbed Third Theatre or experimental theatre. In this sort of theatre in Europe you don't often see something that makes you laugh. The intention of the work, is quite serious and therefore the work is quite serious. You see something perhaps that will make you think, you see something that's very apocalyptic or quite black, or something that's extremely precise and well disciplined, but boring.

S.T.: What we are talking about is a European avant-garde at the moment that has become very self-conscious, very self-obsessed, designed and humourless — I think ultimately, desperately humourless.

R.S.: You know, that word humourless is an interesting word, because the medieval meaning of course is different feelings. You mean at the colloquial level no laughter, but you end finally with something that's dried up — the humours are also moist and they're the source of feelings. Think how defenceless is a person who is laughing. They're expelling air quickly — you can't see too well, you're doubled over. You have to be

about certain kinds of images on television and we're talking about the obsession with trials, whether they happen to be in newspapers, divorce courts, this court, that court, and so on. I'm not talking about the high class popular entertainments. Circus and cabaret are not the ongoing popular entertainments. It fascinates me that there is a big to-do about pornography but you can go to any small southern town, you can go to the video shop and you'll find a little corner where you'll have all these tapes. I assume that the same people who listen to the fundamentalists are also renting these tapes — they are big business. Ethically and morally I may have quarrels, but I'm fascinated by what people do when they are given the individual freedom to do it. The state doesn't force them to do it. It's how they pass their time. What are the under-the-soil links between that and high art or experimental art? It seems to me that high art as it exists in the established theatres and galleries in a certain sense is detached. It has its own tradition. But experimental art for a long time has fed on and crossed over with these popular entertainments. Sometimes the connections may be underneath. It's simply that people may be supported doing one in order to do the other. I

little bit unpredictable. To play means I know what's coming next but not entirely.

S.T.: But also I think the sense of play comes down to a trust in the performance, the text of the performance you have to hand. [And in that sense, when we talked about looseness, that the precision is maintained]. The rigour is maintained, and inside that I trust it's enough to throw the whole lot against the wall and see how it bounces back.

R.S.: It's a disciplined looseness. It's what a master sportsman has, what the master athlete has. Julius Irving, a basketball player he was so good, and he was so precise in his moves, slow motion or fast motion, they were fabulous because the ball would go in. He'd be an asshole if he did all that stuff and the ball would never go in. The capper of it is if he makes a basket doing this, then it's sensational.

P.M.: That's why Ivan Lendl is such a boring tennis player, because he has no sense of play, inside that iron will. I don't know who does. I miss John McEnroe. At least he could throw a tantrum.

R.S.: And when he was playing regularly he was a pretty good player.

BREAKING THE FRAME

NICK KAYE on the use of extremes in performance.

"Like the plague, theatre is a crisis resolved by death or cure. The plague is a superior disease because it is an absolute crisis after which there is nothing left except death or drastic purification . . . theatre action is as beneficial as the plague, impelling us to see ourselves as we are, making the masks fall and divulging our world's lies, aimlessness, meanness, and even two facedness. It shakes off stifling material dullness which even overcomes the senses' clearest testimony, and collectively reveals their dark powers and hidden strength to men, urging them to take a nobler, more heroic stand in the face of destiny than they would have assumed without it." (Antonin Artaud)¹

In many of its aspects performance art deals with extremes. Since the early 1960s, performances by European and then American artists have matched a rejection of conventional aesthetic values and definitions with a questioning and even violation of social and moral taboos. The disturbing nature of performances by the 'Vienna Actionists' since 1960 as well as the Body Artists who came to prominence in the early 1970s are two major examples of a tendency that frequently reasserts itself. It is a kind of work often characterised by a commitment to performing intensely personal, painful or bloody acts transformed into public rituals, enactments that often seem to trip the line between sacrifice and self-indulgence.

The particular qualities of these performances and the strong reaction they provoke owe much to their formal nature. Repeatedly, in stepping into performance, artists have come to consider a direct action to be undertaken in respect of the audience rather than the construction of a dramatic fiction. The resulting emphasis on enactment rather than imitation has shaped the language of performance art and has served to distinguish it from other theatrical genres. Yet at the same time this emphasis has also permitted highly ambiguous actions to enter into its

vocabulary, actions that sometimes threaten to break down the aesthetic frame altogether.

Katia Tsiakma's description of Hermann Nitsch's *48th Action* (1975) demonstrates this point:

'At the sound of loud music Nitsch, like an ancient priest, gives orders for the beginning of the action: a slaughtered lamb is brought on stage and is fastened head down as if crucified; it is gradually disembowelled while its blood and moist innards fall on a white, freshly washed cloth. In the course of the performance . . . innards and buckets of blood are repeatedly poured onto a nude man and woman and manipulated over them. On the ill-treated bodies of the nudes other liquids and solid objects mingle with viscera, while the drained corpse of the animal hangs sarcastically above them. The apparent climax of the ritual consists of a total identification of man and animal, when the human beings — like the lambs — are crucified dripping with blood'.²

While a ritual establishes a ground on which a sacrifice becomes necessary and meaningful, while the dramatic ritual, the imitation of an action, frees an audience from moral culpability for the stage action, Nitsch presents a deliberate violation of moral and social taboos on far less certain ground. Like Chris Burden's crawl half-naked across a car park strewn with glass *Through the Night Softly* 1973 or his crucifixion, nailed through the palms, to the rear of a Volkswagen *Trans-fixed* 1974 or Vito Acconci's masturbation beneath a gallery floor as he whispers to his audience *Seedbed* 1972, the shocking nature of Nitsch's activity may overwhelm an audience's ability or desire to sustain the aesthetic frame.

Nitsch's intention, though, seems to be to provoke just such a crisis. His theme is that of violently breaking through appearances, of penetrating superficial morality and behaviour, arousing and revealing in the spectator essential and animalistic impulses. As he forces us to recognise our 'thirst for the experience of killing'³, he argues,

so we come to glimpse our authentic selves and rediscover our relationship with the world:

'To kill means to penetrate, open a breach with violence in the world that surrounds us, and establish a deep relationship with it.'⁴

It follows that the extreme nature of his performances act as a necessary stimulant to a contact with these violent impulses and so to 'a profound catharsis'⁵ as these impulses are vented:

' . . . it is just this excess, in its most complete representation, which provokes at the end and with an impressive lucidity, the real catharsis. This is the most dramatic moment of the action. A profound sense of repulsion pervades everywhere and at first charges the spectator negatively, but at the same time it acts subtly within the spectacle: the instincts are appeased, they sublimate themselves, they are dulled.'⁶

It is as if Nitsch wishes to restore the painful element of actual violence to the theatrical event. So he rejects 'the typical fiction used in the classic theatre'⁷ in favour of blood rituals employing the warm blood and viscera of freshly slaughtered animals, which he believes may induce a deeper response. Arguably, though, Nitsch's very pursuit of excess reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the cathartic response. Indeed, it is precisely the removal of the morbid and painful element from the stage action that permits the spectator to find a deeper engagement and a more profound emotional experience.

In his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* S.H. Butcher emphasises precisely this point, stating that

'Tragic fear, though it may send an inward shudder through the blood, does not paralyse the mind or stun the sense as does the direct vision of some impending calamity. And the reason is that this fear, unlike the fear of common reality, is based on the imaginative unity with another's life. The spectator is lifted out of

himself. He becomes one with the tragic sufferer, and through him with humanity at large.⁸

The point is that the most profound catharsis is an aesthetic experience. To seek to reinstate the painful element within the stage action and so threaten the audience's aesthetic engagement is to risk simply stepping back into a 'common reality' and so 'paralysing the mind and stunning the sense.'

The problems that appear to be inherent within Nitsch's work, however, have been addressed directly by many performance artists. And it is clear that such work frequently strikes a careful balance, turning the "threat" to the spectator into a central point of power in the work.

Nitsch's need to attack the 'mask,' to break through a kind of alienation by using extreme methods has been paralleled in much European and American work, despite philosophical and formal differences. Artists such as Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Barry LeVa, Marina Abramovic, Gina Pane have presented intense and painful performances in which they are driven to a point of physical and psychological crisis. Here, frequently, the actions of the artist challenge the formal relationship between performer and spectator, deliberately undermining the viewer's ability to remain at a distance from the aesthetic object. In exploring these processes, though, this work does not simply attempt to destroy the viewer's formal separation, but rather seeks to heighten an awareness of the extreme difficulty of contact itself.

Vito Acconci's performances of the early 1970s directly address these tensions. *Hand and Mouth*, recorded on film in 1970, is described by Acconci as consisting of

'Pushing my hand into my mouth until I choke and am forced to release my hand — continuing the action for the duration of the film.'⁹

While in *Conversions 1*, first released and documented as a 'photo-piece' in October 1970 and later filmed, Acconci attempted to 'change his sex,' to mould himself into the appearance of a woman by

'Putting a naked flame to my breasts; burning the hair off. Pulling at my breasts, trying to develop female breasts.'¹⁰

In *Vito Acconci, A Retrospective: 1969-1980* Acconci described the resulting film:

'Conversions 1 (Light/Reflection/Self-Control). The screen is dark; there's a moving light; gradually its apparent that the light is a candle,

I'm moving the candle around in front of my body. The camera is fixed, the candle shows up parts of my body against the dark; I'm seen from the waist up. As I bring the candle to my breast, the camera zooms in: the camera remains still as I use the candle to burn the hair off each breast and then, once my chest is hairless, I pull each breast in a futile attempt to develop a woman's breast.'¹¹

Acconci's 'essay' *Adaptation Studies* describes the personal consequences of such performances and makes clear the structure and effect of his actions. The action that takes him toward the goal; the forcing of his hand into his mouth, the burning of the hair; is a 'stress agent.' It is as a response to the 'stress agent' that the performance emerges and is carried forward; the initial 'alarm reaction,' a 'groping for direction,' is overcome through a conscious 'adaptation' to the stress, a moving toward the goal and determination to succeed as far as possible. This in itself, though, leads to the 'break down' of the performance in

the face of the stress and the impossible goal that will relieve it. Yet this is a 'break down' that has come with Acconci's 'exhaustion,' his personal submission and arrival at a state where he has 'fallen to bits' under the exertion, under the pressure of attempting to 'adapt.'

Acconci's interest in such work lies in the emotional consequences of his continuing activity as it is pushed to an extreme. In his notes on *Hand and Mouth* Acconci draws attention to his

'Exhaustion — the more I do it, the worse I get — adaptation here can only mean that I'd have to be able to swallow my hand — pushing into myself results in pulling myself apart.'¹²

As Acconci pushes himself to his limits, so he 'reveals' himself to the viewer. By forcing himself into a physical and emotional loss of control, allowing his 'personal self' to emerge. He notes that,

'... what interested me about imposing stress on myself was that this was a way that I could work

Adaptation Studies, by Vito Acconci



This can be a reason for performance: I'm forced to pay attention — my whole body bristles — I'm groping for a direction

myself into exhaustion stages, in other words to get myself out of control, that I would be more vulnerable to a viewer, more open to a viewer.¹³

These performances seek to provoke a literal crisis in the body and mind of the artist. In doing so Acconci offers himself up to the viewer, as if sacrificing himself in a desperate attempt to make contact. Yet these actions are highly ambiguous. Acconci's physical and psychological break down 'for' the viewer is also an imposition of responsibility, a direct assault on the viewer. At the same time as he makes this assault, however, Acconci firmly distances himself from his audience. *Hand and Mouth* and *Conversions 1* are recorded on film. So Acconci emphasises his own isolation, the audience's inability to act, their voyeurism. Acconci opens himself to the viewer and yet refuses him access, and finally the performance establishes a tension between the formal relationship between viewer and performer and Acconci's frustrated challenge to that separation, his break

down and revelation of self.

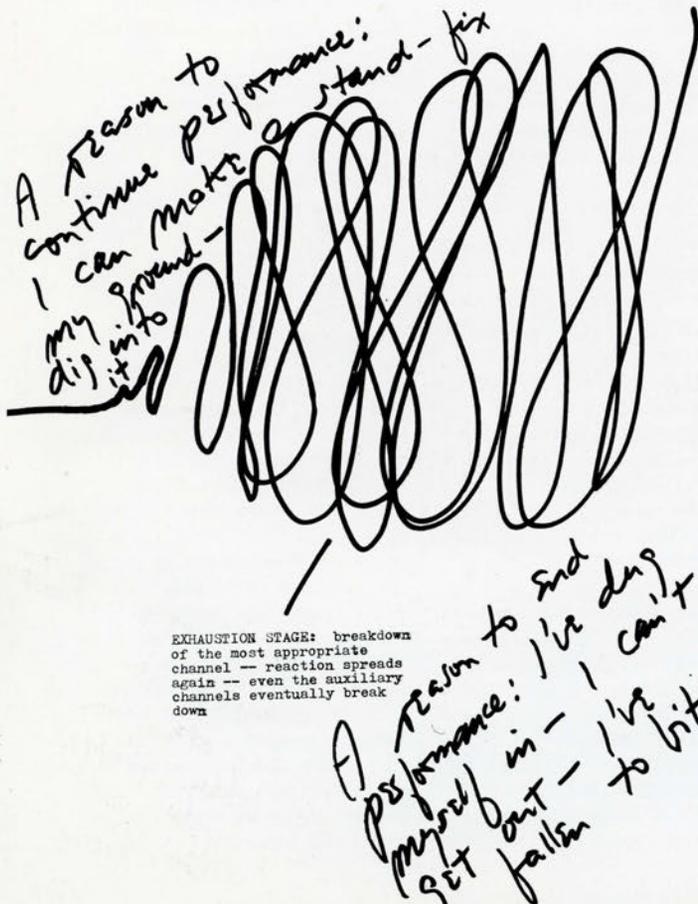
Such performances participate in a broader stream of work to be found within the various forms of performance art since the 1950s. Many of the Happenings, in combining 'found' and made objects, pre-determined and accidental activities in natural and city environments deliberately undermined the physical and conceptual integrity of the artwork. Presenting the viewer with a confusing, all-enveloping plethora of events, such work deliberately undermined his ability to sustain the aesthetic frame. Similarly, George Brecht, whose work reflected much of the spirit and many of the facets of Fluxus, sought a 'borderline art,' where definitions of art and life became ambiguous, and the viewer unsure about his relationship with that which he meets.

The danger of presentations such as Nitsch's is that in attempting to provoke a crisis, the performer may simply overstep the mark, ignoring those tensions and relationships out of which such work draws its power. For

Acconci, and many of his contemporaries, performance involved first of all negotiation with the viewer. The rapid changes in the work of many Body Artists from confrontational performances of the late 1960s to 'installation' and object-based work of the mid-1970s reflected the difficulties that such 'interactional' performance presented. In the case of Acconci his work radically changed as he sought the most appropriate ways of drawing the viewer into an active contact.

For Artaud, *Theatre of Cruelty*, the necessity of extreme methods, the need to provoke crisis, never meant a simple physical destruction. His vision was firmly rooted in the poetic and the metaphysical, from which his theatre was to draw its power. In his writings on *Theatre and Cruelty* he states unequivocally that

'... we believe there are living powers in what is called poetry, and that the picture of a crime presented in the right stage conditions is something infinitely more dangerous to the mind than if the same crime were committed in life.'¹⁴



1. A. Artaud, 'Theatre and the Plague,' *The Theatre and Its Double* (London 1977) pp7-22. Quote p.22.
2. K. Tsiakma, 'Hermann Nitsch: A Modern Ritual,' *Studio International*, July/August 1976, pp13-15. Quote p.13.
3. L. Inga-Pin, *Performances* (Padua 1978) p.19.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. L. Vergine, *Il Corpo Come Linguaggio* (Milan 1974).
7. Ibid.
8. S.H. Butcher (Ed.), *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York 1951) p.266.
9. V. Acconci, 'Adaptation Studies,' R. Kostalanetz, *Essaying Essays: Alternative Forms of Exposition* (New York 1975) pp190-195. Quote p.194.
10. From Acconci's unpublished notes to *Conversions 1* (collection of Museum of Modern Art, New York).
11. J.R. Kirshner, *Vito Acconci: A Retrospective: 1969-1980* (Chicago 1980) p.15.
12. V. Acconci, *Adaptation Studies*, R. Kostalanetz op.cit.
13. M. Kunz, 'Interview with Vito Acconci,' *V. Acconci & Kunstmuseum Luzern, Vito Acconci* (Luzern 1978).
14. A. Artaud, 'Theatre and Cruelty,' *The Theatre and Its Double* (London 1977) pp64-67. Quote p.65.

Vito Acconci
Adaptation Studies
 Published in *Essaying Essays*: Ed. Richard Kostalanetz. Out of London Press, 1975

EPILEPSY: PERFORMANCE, SPECTATORSHIP & ABJECTION

By JANE GILES.

The cinema aims at transforming the agitated witness into a conscious observer. Nothing could be more legitimate than its lack of inhibitions in picturing spectacles which upset the mind.

Siegfried Kracauer Theory of Film (Oxford University Press, 1960, p.58)

The chance encounter with a tonic-clonic seizure (epilepsy's "grand-mal") can be an alienating experience for the unwitting spectator. S/he is thrust into a space where there are no conventions, no controlling gaze, and no requisition of that look. Worse: whilst seen to be looking, the spectator is unable to really see, to stare rudely; fascination is beckoned and then tabooed in a turning away. The paradigm of performance is appropriate here in that it implicates the spectator, the one who takes up a distance from the spectacle of the convulsing body, and breaks out away from it, rarely towards to intervene.

The taboo anxiously denies experience of epilepsy, denies knowledge: this is a dangerous disavowal, one which paralyzes the spectator, one which can kill where it aims only to sustain. To name, to explicate, to assess this taboo attempts to make a space for the potential dissolution of its structures.

What is horrifying about the tonic-clonic seizure is two-fold: firstly there is the awful falling-away of the body, which lies rigid and cadaverous. As Julia Kristeva points out in *Powers of*

Horror, the corpse is the utmost of abjection, seen outside of order, seen as the self become total waste, I become object, Other. The corpse fascinates and beckons, but in doing so shocks, freezes the viewer and an unbearable identification is made between the rigid, staring self and the tonic, prone body. This identification is what is censored in a turning away; the taboo functions to preserve the man-made distinctions between self and other, to maintain an order. Margiad Evans wrote of fear and pity:

'If we could only see ourselves dying probably we should be neither afraid of it nor un pitying.'

The tonic stage of the seizure is a representation of the self dying, dead, and may subjectively render something of this experience; but the person with epilepsy never sees themself, and neither does the supposed spectator, tabooed and not-looking.

For the spectator the second visible stage of the tonic-clonic scenario consolidates the horror with a re-animation of the 'corpse', as the body convulses, bursting out in discharges. In self protection the spectator turns away, doesn't look, leaving the other in a state of pure body at odds with a treacherous environment.

To tackle this taboo, there is a necessary motivation and validation of the look: fascination can be indulged in a controlled environment, and as Kracauer notes, this is the realm of the

cinema. Surveying the representation of epilepsy in film, it's immediately apparent that there is an inscription of an ethical space around this spectacle. Fascination and horror is mediated by the looks of characters within the diagesis, such as the seizures shown in *Mouchette* (Robert Bresson, 1966); *Meanstreets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973); *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1976). The onus upon the cinema spectator is relieved by this strategy of deflecting the direct stare, and the disruption to the film text is itself minimised, contained. The disorder of epilepsy is narratively accommodated by invoking it, and using it as a symbol, and as a 'signifier of' the strange, the abject.

Film has a particular affinity with epilepsy on two accounts. Firstly, the spectator/spectacle relation of cinema is equivalent to the scenario of the tonic-clonic seizure (albeit that the latter is governed by chance, and the former permits the gaze). Secondly, in physiological terms the phi principle of film — whereby the projection of 24 frames per second creates the optical illusion of continuous movement — is a flicker, and flicker is the catalyst of seizures in certain instances of epilepsy. Two experimental filmmakers have directly addressed this relationship.

The Flicker (Tony Conrad, 1965) alternates transparent and opaque black frames to create a stroboscopic effect, which will cause perhaps one in 15,000 spectators to have a seizure. The film begins with a dramatic warning:

The producer, distributor, & exhibitors waive all liability for physical or mental injury possibly caused by the motion picture "The Flicker".

Since this film may induce epileptic seizures or produce mild symptoms of shock treatment in certain persons, you are cautioned to remain in the theatre only at your own risk. A physician should be in attendance.

This is followed by 47 different black and white frame combinations (which took Conrad two days to film and seven months to edit). Sheldon Renan describes the effect in *Underground Film*:

'it starts with a high flicker rate of 24 flashes per second, causing little effect, but gradually lowers to a vigorously eye "massaging" rate of 18 to 4 flashes per second. The flicker rate climbs toward the end of the film, returning the eye to a more peaceful environment.'
(p.140)

Paul Sharits' installation *Epileptic Seizure Comparison* (1976) consisted of two film loops (one showing a tonic-clonic seizure, the other a seizure induced by photic stimulation) projected within a reflecting trapezoid space in which the spectator stood, playing stereophonically two soundtracks (one the voices of the two filmed subjects whilst entering their respective seizures, the other a synthesizer track based on the rhythms of the structures of the two respective electroencephalographs). Inspired by the evidence that a heightened state of creativity exists subjectively just prior to the seizure, Sharits' intention was of:

'an attempt to orchestrate sound and light rhythms in an intimate and proportional space, an ongoing location wherein non-epileptic persons may begin to experience, under "controlled conditions" . . . "the majestic potentials of convulsive seizure".'

In both the cases of Conrad and Sharits, there functions a challenge to the conventions of spectatorship whereby the subject is strategically differentiated from the object-spectacle. Here the two are experienced as merging, or changing places. Something of the subjective experience of epilepsy is being suggested, induced, if not objectively interpreted in a workable linguistic description.

Whereas there exist works which visually represent physical sensation (and especially pain) — for example metaphoric images of migraine, of toothache, or Frida Kahlo's

descriptions of her shattered body — objective visual representations of the subjective sensations of epilepsy seem not to exist (or to be seen). For such expressions, literature appears to be the prevalent medium. The works of Dostoyevsky (*The Idiot*) and Margiad Evans (*A Ray of Darkness*), demonstrate that the suggestive potential of the written word can pin down the experience of their epilepsy, by poetic metaphor, or the strategy of a certain signified ineffability.

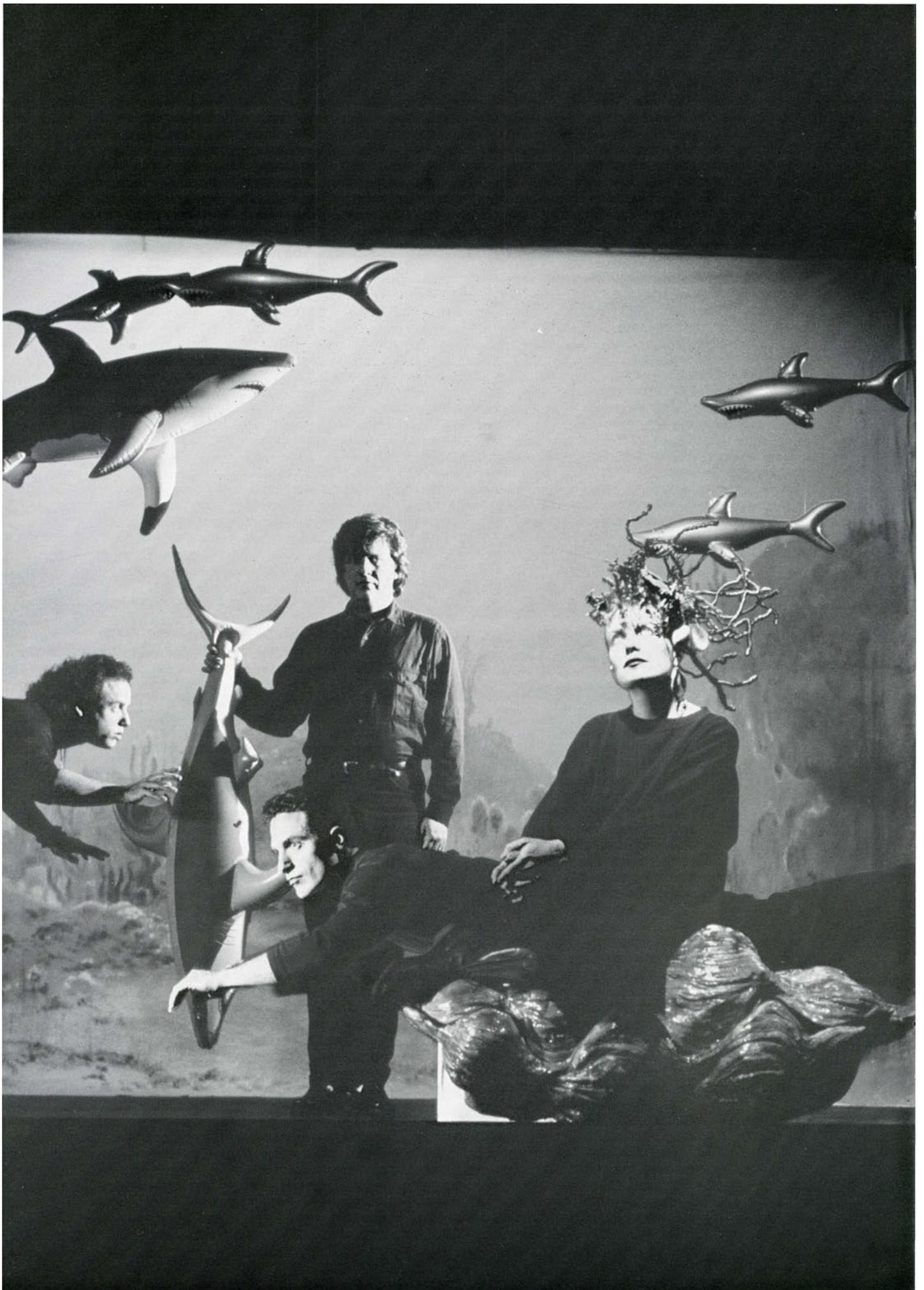
In the realm of self-representation, epilepsy renders a specific paradox, a disjuncture between experience and appearance: when the subject feels most agitated, prior to the seizure, s/he appears to be calm, but during the clonic stage of convulsions looking and sounding tortured, s/he is unconscious. Margiad Evans compares unconsciousness to death, writing:

'unconscious can teach. It can gently and as it were, by steps or a staircase, show us the probable darkness of death, and remove our fear of that descent.'
(p.11)

To induce something of the sensations of epilepsy teaches through experience, and perhaps can dispell fear through putting the spectator in the other's place. As Pudovkin stated:

'The film is the greatest teacher because it teaches not only through the brain but through the whole body.'
(Quoted p.160 *Theory of Film*)

But what remains is a certain fissure between experience and knowledge: the former alone doesn't render the tools which are needed for the inevitable social confrontation with epilepsy. Working with the prerequisite of the look, what film can do is 'combine' an emotive, subjective sensation of a seizure with a long, learning gaze at the baldly stated spectacle, and furthermore render an analytical, deconstructive account of epilepsy. Epilepsy can be spelled out didactically, both in terms of its forms and the means for its management, showing this to the spectator who feels, and who ultimately 'knows'. In this way, the agitated witness is transformed into a conscious observer, and finally into an active performer in the scenario of a seizure. ●



TALKING WITH A HEAD

Tina Weymouth has a chat with PETER CULSHAW

TINA WEYMOUTH is half-French, an admiral's daughter who is a founder member of the Talking Heads and Tom Tom Club, and recently produced with her husband Chris Frantz (a general's son, and Talking Heads drummer) the Ziggy Marley LP *Conscious Party*. According to Jerome Davis in his Talking Heads biography "the combination of Byrne's creativity and Weymouth's very American go-getter tenacity fueled an extraordinary entity. Weymouth and her husband gave Byrne a practical vehicle through which to work. It seems very likely that if David Byrne had never met them, no one would know who David Byrne was". There's an element of truth in all that, a fairly common attitude, although the general focus on Byrne has tended to downplay Tina Weymouth's vital musical contribution to the Talking Heads.

Ed Bicknell, who promoted the first Talking Heads shows in Europe in 1977 supporting the Ramones said he quite liked the music but what really intrigued him was their appearance, particularly the fact that they all had long necks. Tina Weymouth doesn't actually have a remarkably long neck, although probably above average. Tina Weymouth is sitting in the notoriously rock'n'roll hotel the Portobello having a late breakfast after playing with the Tom Tom Club at a small London club, the Borderline, the night before. Some reggae music drifts over the hotel's F.A. system.

Peter Culshaw: I was curious that you and Chris (Frantz) were chosen to produce Ziggy Marley's *Conscious Party* LP. You didn't seem the most obvious choice.

Tina Weymouth: Alex Sadkin was going to do it — he'd worked with the Wailers, Grace Jones, Thomson Twins and others but he was killed in the Bahamas by a jeep overturning, which was . . . unlucky. Virgin knew we were friends with Sly and Robbie and we'd worked with the Jamaican producer Steven Stanley on *Wordy Rappinghood*. Virgin knew we wouldn't whitewash the project but they'd still probably get something which could 'compete internationally'. Plus we'd been giant fans of the Wailers since the early 70s.

P.C.: It can't be easy for Ziggy, he's got a tough act to follow. I mean some people see him practically as the son of God.

T.W.: I think he's coping. But he never had a choice really. It chose him. But he's for real. He reads the Bible the whole time, and sees everything in terms of Biblical prophecies. From the outside it seems that he suddenly jumped from being a child to a man at 16 which is like a tribal thing. He commands a lot of personal power. He's very gentle, but he just has to say something and (she clicks her fingers) it gets done. He doesn't believe in sex before marriage and he's looking for the right woman to be his spouse, he's going to choose very carefully. And he has that political naivety of his whole family, which is just how he perceives things.

P.C.: As well as being a reggae fan in the seventies, you must have been following the development of the rap. *Wordy Rappinghood* (1980) must have been one of the earliest big rap hits.

T.W.: Kurtis Blow was a big hero of ours and Chris was playing drums with him on *These Are The Breaks* which hit big. Then someone played Grandmaster Flash 'Genius Of Love' at about the time he was doing 'The Message' and suggested he rap on it, although it was a slower groove than most rap. But we've always gone in for slower grooves for some reason with the Tom Tom Club. Rap took over from punk as the 'street' music — I still think they've got to find the best way to present it live, playing samples live and so on.

P.C.: Perhaps the slower grooves was the climate. After all you were recording in the Bahamas . . .

T.W.: That might well have had something to do with it. The heat. I mean look at the way people dance in Europe, throwing themselves about. In somewhere like Brazil it's much slower and slinkier.

P.C.: Talking of which, I understand David Byrne is currently making a film in Brazil.

T.W.: He flew out yesterday. He's making a little documentary about the dance and music of Brazilian voodoo. The only encounters I've had

with it is the Haitian variety, which of course everyone tells you to be very careful of. We sampled some voodoo drums which we used for the *Don't Say No* single.

P.C.: As I understand it, each drum pattern relates to a particular god or saint, and you have to watch which ones you use.

T.W.: I think it was OK, it was from a benign sacrifice. It was the sort of ritual anyone can see, whereas you or I wouldn't get to see the really underground stuff. The benign side has an ethical moral code, but then there's the darker side too . . .

P.C.: Have you come across the work of Robert Farris Thompson? (Hip ethnomusicologist/art historian — latest book *Flash Of The Spirit*).

T.W.: David knows him. I was buying a book of his the other day and the girl next to me in the queue said that he was her teacher at Yale, and a very good teacher. I love what he's done pointing out the ways that African culture has influenced so many things in the US. For example, anyone who collects early Americana has these quilts invented by Africans. Very intricate with lots of borders to fool the bad spirits. Its like the Chinese tradition of Feng Shui where the houses have crooked paths, so that the spirits can't come at you in straight lines.

P.C.: It reminds me of reading in a Dr Who annual that the only way to avoid Daleks exterminating you is running from them Zig-Zag because their antennae can't move very fast. A friend of mine's father is a Hong Kong banker, and they have to have the Feng Shui man in once a month — if something like the clock isn't in the right position over the door it has to be moved, or the bank clerks walk out.

T.W.: When we bought our house we had a priest bless it, and a Feng Shui master come in . . . I was trying to cover every area. My mother brought us up in a combination of superstition and science. She was a medical student, very empirical, but she lived in a house in Brittany which was haunted. Even Chris, who is a sceptic says absolutely that ghosts and spirits live there. My great grandfather wrote a book *Les Legendes De La Mort* a

A still from the video-promo for Tom Tom Club's single

famous French book about the supernatural.

P.C.: Are you a post-feminist?

T.W.: I suppose I must be, probably. Put it this way. I've never believed men have a particularly easier time than women.

P.C.: The new Tom Tom Club LP *Boom Boom Chi Boom Boom*, despite the title seems in general to be darker than your previous LPs, and that seems to be a move away from dance music to a more guitar-based 'indie' sound.

T.W.: People say if you've found a formula like why change it? It's like when Coca Cola tried to change their recipe people said it's not the real thing anymore. But we can't work like that, we may lose some of our audience, but we'll gain others. In the US there's a view that you should stick to your musical tradition. It seems more open here — you get white soul singers who don't think twice about all that. We've always tended to crash various things together and see what happens, like with the *Naked* LP. Stick musicians together and you speak a common language. It certainly didn't feel like on *Naked* we were raiding other cultures, it was more organic. It's hard enough to write a song, and things always change as you record them. It wasn't a predetermined thing whether the Tom Tom Club's new LP came out as dance or rock music.

P.C.: Presumably with David doing his films and the big project with Robert Wilson (Due to hit London as part of LIFT next year) there are no plans for the Talking Heads to tour?

T.W.: What happened to the Talking Heads was that we used to be a band that played clubs, but if we came over now we'd have to play Wembley to 30,000-40,000 people which is anathema. Bands like U2 don't seem to have a problem playing big stadiums, but to us it became spiritually dry, there was a danger of being absorbed by the corporate money machine. Perhaps it was our art school training, but we wanted to individuate as artists as well as having the collective group.

P.C.: Maybe there's some advantages of the Talking Heads not touring in that it keeps the mystique of the group intact as opposed to some bands who flog themselves to death.

T.W.: Also it's a fantastic opportunity for the Tom Tom Club playing these small places, because the way people react to what you do changes it. On big stages there's more a sense of something finished, we are the authorities and you are going to listen, whereas smaller places are much more of an education, there's a sense of participation, of the public moulding the creation. It's part of the whole

social pattern-painting, conceptual art or whatever is much more solitary.

P.C.: There had been quite a few stories about friction within the Talking Heads (e.g. Rolling Stone's *Are the Talking Heads Byrned Out?*) — a current rumour has it that you and David have signed an agreement not to be rude about each other in public.

T.W.: I've never felt anything but love for David, he's an old friend and partner for many years and I respect him. But for a time when David was going off working on things it did seem like we were the good support players who'd been put on hold. It was terribly frustrating, because we didn't feel like making films and David wanted us involved with them. For him it was right, but not for us, it was a whole big other business, it just wasn't in our hearts. In a way, he felt rather abandoned by the rest of us. But we feel protective towards what he does, just as he supported us when people said the Tom Tom Club was just the Talking Heads silly, goofy little sister.

P.C.: You didn't fancy working with Robert Wilson, for example?

T.W.: I didn't want to get involved with that at all. There's a distancing thing that goes on his work. We introduced David to Robert Wilson. After *Einstein On The Beach* there was a potential there for performance art/theatre to catch on massively with the public. In fact, it seemed that Philip Glass was the one who seemed to need the feedback from

the public, whereas Robert Wilson stands in the lobby at *The CIVIL WarS* yelling at people who try and leave 'Why are you leaving?' he shouts at them.

P.C.: To an outsider it seems the New York art crowd is quite an incestuous network. I don't mean that in a derogatory way. But there's a group of people who seem to support each other and work together — Spalding Gray works with Jonathan Demme who works with Laurie Anderson and Talking Heads, David Byrne works with Robert Wilson who works with Philip Glass and so on. What's quite impressive apart from anything else is that somehow they all have found a way to deal with the contemporary corporate monsters of the record companies, press, film companies and still produce interesting work.

T.W.: As far as the press goes, I think you just have to lay it on the line. There are some people who are good at manipulating the press, but often it doesn't work, the press get even. You just have to see the press as a little barometer of public opinion, although eventually the public makes its own decision based on its own desires. But it's true there is a feeling of artists ganging together to try to retain freedom for the arts in the same way a group of journalists might get together and demand freedom of the press. It's really just a group of people who want to say that nothing is dead while people are living. ●



A QUESTION OF DIFFERENCE

This year's National Review of Live Art opened up an old debate between theatre and fine art. MARK GAYNOR, himself a participant in the Review, puts the question into a wider context.

FEW READERS CAN have failed to notice that the 8th National Review of Live Art has recently taken place. What people may not hear about is the difference of opinion expressed in the Platform Discussion, the Platform presumably a hot bed of new activity and an indication of things to come. It was observed that artists and people from a theatrical background formed, socially at least, different groups. A simple question 'Could you apply to the Theatre Dept. for funding?' was answered by an unproblematic 'Yes'. Only once, and very late in the debate, did anyone raise the subject of video. Unfortunately, the debate degenerated into the forming of defensive stances and attitudes, exemplifying Steve Rogers' comment: 'Performance art often gets accused, wrongly, of being elitist . . . It surrounds itself with what is actually a protective bearing of introspection, or private codes and signals, which is invariably interpreted by outsiders as arrogance.' These stances were not in themselves questioned. Having taken the opportunity to develop this debate privately I would like to take this opportunity to develop it publicly. My own contribution was to state that the most productive aspect of showing such diverse works was to point up the differences. This was not a qualitative statement. The points already raised are evidence to the fact that differences do exist and are, perhaps, more evident and pertinent than ever before; for it's hardly a new argument. At the risk of marginalising Video, for my present purposes I shall restrict myself to the 'Fine Art' vs 'Theatre' debate. Whether it goes one way or another is less important than not remaining in a no-man's land where, in the present climate of ever increasing cutbacks, the predominant ideology of painting could exclude performance as belonging to Theatre or Theatre exclude experiment as belonging to the visual arts. Anybody who has tried to raise support from their local Regional Arts Association understands the difficulties of being a half-breed.

The title 'Review of Live Art' loses the double meaning of the word 'live' that is present in the sub-title of this magazine 'Live Art Now' and simply replaces the connotations of the word 'performance' with another word for the same thing, effectively reducing the clarion call for a way of life to the description of an event. The description of an event rarely does more than scratch the surface patina. Just because two things look the same it doesn't mean they are the same, or vice versa. The recognition of difference is not, as can be misconstrued, in order to establish a hierarchy i.e. Fine Art over

Theatre but rather to facilitate a debate in which the social structure that informs the difference can be demystified. The refusal to acknowledge a difference is the refusal to acknowledge the social structure. Difference is not an inherent quality. Just as feminism now commonly discusses female identity as a social construct and not as innate femininity, so must 'Live Artists' be prepared to discuss their identity in a wider social context and not just in terms of what they do. Our activities do not take place in a vacuum.

To say that barriers have been broken and that everything in the garden is glorious is like saying equality has been achieved, we have a woman Prime Minister, now it is time to go back to pretty frocks and nest building. It simply is not true and (probably) counter-productive.

The debate would seem to hinge on whether or not live art is the domain of an exclusive group and what could possibly be constructive about making such a distinction. Without a strong, identifiable edifice of its own, and the



Is it art or theatre? Euan Sutherland, Third Eye Centre, October 1988

unlikely of one appearing in the immediate future, performance must align itself with an existing one or risk being squeezed out altogether. Might I suggest that the alignment be not so much with artists as with art, for the following reason. In order to secure the future an educated audience must be developed as well as educated practitioners. The earlier that education begins the better. Art is at the core of the National Curriculum after the education Reform Bill, but Drama is not. This is lamentable because Drama has hitherto been used to great effect as a cross curriculum activity, an educational tool, and not just the production of school plays. As we witness the decline in population due to the 'Pill Generation', with the emphasis on training and financial self sufficiency, we will see a parallel reduction in the opportunities for Drama in education. Alarmist as this may seem there is nothing like planning for the future. Consequently, some educationalists are turning to 'performance art' as an educational tool legitimised by its inclusion in the fine arts. This is a wonderful opportunity on which to build. If live art was seen to take on the kind of role that drama has played, I believe, we will see not only a greater understanding of a discipline and therefore development, but a real integration of creativity, not just a bold statement that differences don't/shouldn't exist. But if it is in education that the future of this area lies then it must be discovered exactly what it is that can be taught. A discipline would have to be defined. This discipline may be discovered by discussing what constitutes the area or conversely, what constitutes the difference. A common remark is what does it matter as long as it is good. This I find of little use as they only objective criteria for judgement can be effectiveness, does it work. To judge effectiveness one has to understand the aims. What are the aims of 'Performance Art'?

The aim of all arts are surely communication with an audience. Art is communicable language, albeit eclectic and/or personal, and not merely therapeutic, self (indulgent) expression. In order to make effective communication, to make oneself understood, one has to understand the means of perception as well as production. A great deal of emphasis has already been laid, in vis. arts, on production — process vs product. Some would say that this is where the identity of performance lies; in the rejection of the saleable product, where the process is the product. In fact, much of the most renowned live work has come in the form of finished product i.e. the show. Indeed, process has not been the exclusive provenance of live art; witness the work of Pollack, Serra, Long etc. The use of process can be said to be to draw attention to the means of production and thereby disturb the common perception of what constitutes the work. The words process and production can be interpreted as construction which it turn can be read as practise or working method. We can now see the emphasis on the practitioner and not on the perceiver. As such, the definition of performance as a work in process is not alone adequate as it ignores the perceiver, the other half essential for communication and almost certainly present in the form of audience. The essential difference between 'art' and 'theatre' is the perception or rather preconception of this audience. The act of looking at art is very different to looking at theatre. Even if the

audience is made up of exactly the same people a different set of preconceptions and expectations is brought to bear on the observations of different cultural products. In the world of art, rather than the stylistic variations of individual artists, the real innovations have been in the means of exhibition; the modern phenomena of the temporary exhibition, group exhibition as concept and the subsequent importance of the catalogue as document, and perhaps most fundamental the fact that most people experience art through reproduction of on form or another rather than direct confrontation. Another innovation is the substitution of a real experience in place of a second hand or represented one. Live Art. This is the kind of conditioning that predetermines the spectators expectations for experiencing an art work where ever it may be. These conditions also have their effect on the production of art works.

Where the confusion has arisen, I believe, is in the incorporation of theatrical skills into the 'staging' of a real experience for an audience unable or unwilling to think of the gallery exhibition as itself a form of theatricality; the public exhibition of actions carried out in private. The mastery and exposition of technique and skill had long since ceased to be a prerequisite of the painter and sculptor but not so for the live performer. Interest quickly wains when the ability to enthral is absent. This demand for performing skills parallels the return to traditional values elsewhere; professionalism, entertainment value, narrative, figuration and painting generally, and of course earning a living. In short, a shift to the right, conservatism. As the acquisition of these skills develop in conjunction with technical facilities, we see an increasing dependence on the established theatre space. Complicated by the bureaucratic constraints on such places the shift in emphasis has a corresponding shift in audience perception and expectation. This shift may well take place within the spectator but also opens up the possibility for the actual spectator to change. The broadening of audience in this way is not in itself a bad thing but by attracting an audience with

little or no experience of other forms of theatricality i.e. the gallery exhibition, one is presented with the question 'What is the difference?' when the only perceived difference is title. This is then further complicated by attracting new practitioners from this new audience who become stylish exponents of the bold new art, with its air of seriousness afforded art but not 'fringe' theatre. This may seem like a crass over simplification of events that took place over a long period of time but, in keeping with our times, the turn over gets quicker with the intermediate steps being left out, namely a real concept of audience. I find somewhat offensive 'What does it matter?' as a response to the question of difference, offensive to the questioner — the audience. It might not be the end of the world, art never is, but the question would not be asked if it didn't matter.

Perhaps then, one definition of live art is an art that takes into account and tries to understand the contextual relationship between the artist and the spectator through the exposition of actual experience. Instead of being a purist, restrictive definition of live art this in fact opens up the options for live art to be anything but not for anything to be live art. We haven't come that far yet.

As an educational tool, under the above definition, live art would be a means of developing understanding of the social context of different disciplines in conjunction with the acquisition of skills and training.

This is only one contribution, from one side of the fence, to a debate that will continue. I am constantly being asked 'What exactly is performance art?' or 'What's the difference between performance art and fringe theatre?' or, more offensively, 'What's the difference between performance art and bad dance?' These are questions that will not go away and cannot be answered properly when there is no sense of cohesion. Its so difficult to talk about something when there is no consensus on what that something is. ●

**Performance News Supplement to the special Edge '88 edition.*

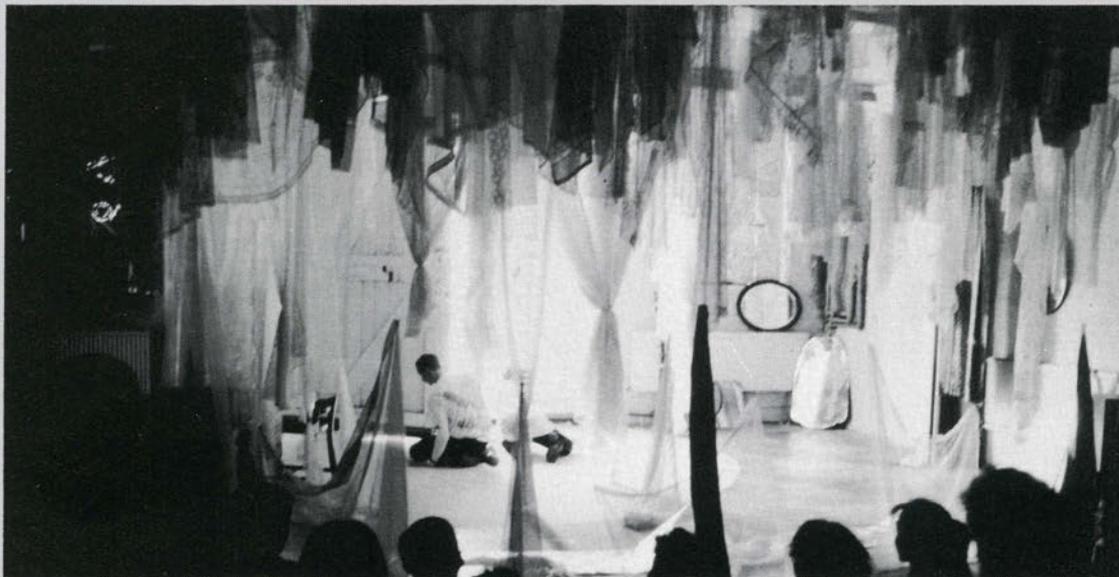


John Jordan, Third Eye Centre, October 1988

MIND THE GAP

Our inquiry into the health and role of performance within higher and further education continues here with Hull College of Higher Education. CATHERINE SHIELDS, HOWARD JONES, RUTH BAKER, ANDREW SMITH, MARK HUDSON and TIM BRENNAN are all students or recent graduates of the Timed Based Media course at Hull, here they consider the value of short term residencies as a way of teaching performance.

PHOTO / J. P. READ



Andrew Smith & Lynda Mellar

THE MAJORITY OF Time Based Media students at H.C.H.E. have shown work outside of the institutional framework. The college is a resource which allows students to make mistakes within a cushioned environment. By showing work outside this framework students are making themselves accountable within a wider context. This is an essential practice that students must maintain if they are to cut through the boundaries that have been defined as the "real" and the "unreal" art world.

Apart from academic achievement, recognised by the C.N.A.A. external assessments in recent years, the strength in student work from H.C.H.E. can be seen to be true, simply by leafing through recent issues of this magazine, Independent Media and the Arts Council Performance Art Calendar.

Performance has never been set down as a defined area of practice at Humberside College. In the past it would have taken a student of pioneering constitution to navigate her or his way through the tutored areas of Video, Photography, Sculpture, Painting and Printmaking.

Hull's Fine Art course is a non-

departmental one. Students are allowed to work across areas and because of this many find themselves working in Performance. However what has been lacking is an attempt to concentrate this as an area of practice. The only forum for live art to develop in Humberside College is within Catherine Morley's Critical and Theoretical Studies electives. These consist of a studio workshop, where students' ideas are tried out and discussed within the historical context of performance art. This integration of studio practice and theoretical criticism proves to be an invaluable life support system for the continuation of performance at H.C.H.E. It is interesting that this facility was initiated and is contained within the C.A.T.S. course, with little tutorial back up from the studio areas and no studio based lecturer versed predominantly in performance.

Since the appointment of Fran Cottell as Performance Artist in Residence, more students have been exposed to the area. The nature of the placement allowed students based in any area and from any year to work individually or collaboratively on projects. Fran, yet again another

outsider to the Fine Art course, proved to be a valuable asset to the course's structure. Fran generated a lot of energy amongst the students. She exposed a gap in the structure of the course. The problem now facing the students is how to maintain the momentum created by the Blue Line Project.

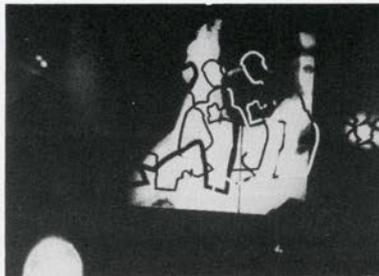
The lack of any long term performance guidance seemed to result in The Blue Line Project, however successful, remaining an 'extra curricula' activity. The need for a performance area has been continually fobbed off with one-off projects and residencies (Blue Line and Drums Along the Humber) have seemed to have been successful. If there had been a strong foundation of Performance Criticism within the college, these projects would have surpassed their initial enthusiasm. There is no measure, no standard. Enthusiasm is not enough. One possible solution would be to expand Catherine Morley's role in the college, as both practitioner and theoretician. This at least would provide a solid basis that could then monopolise on part time residencies as opposed to them amounting to nothing more than performance 'binges'. ●

EDGE 88

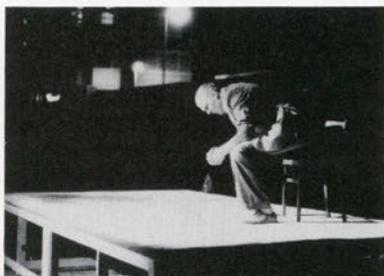
The Edge 88 festival, Britains first experime-
area of central London between 13th and
(All photos by Peter Barker except where



Peter Zegveld
The Galley
Slaughterhouse Gallery, September 14/15



Roberto Taroni
Portrait de L'artiste en Saltimbanque
Flaxman Gallery, September 15



Nigel Rolfe
Shooting — Shitting
Kingsway Princeton College, September 16



Ulrike Rosenbach
In the House of Women
Grand Priory Church, September 17



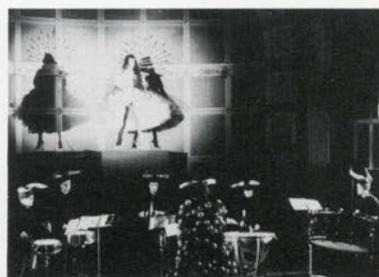
Tina Keane
The Diver
Ironmonger Row Swimming Baths, September 24-25



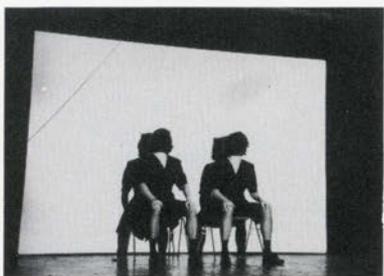
Carolee Schneemann
Cat Scan
8, Northburgh St, September 17



Alistair MacLennan
Bled Edge
Kingsway Princeton College, September 19-23



Carles Santos
Arganchulla, Arganchulla-Gallac
Finsbury Town Hall, September 22



Derek Kreckler, Adrienne Gaha, Sarah Miller
Told By An Idiot
Flaxman Gallery, September 20-21

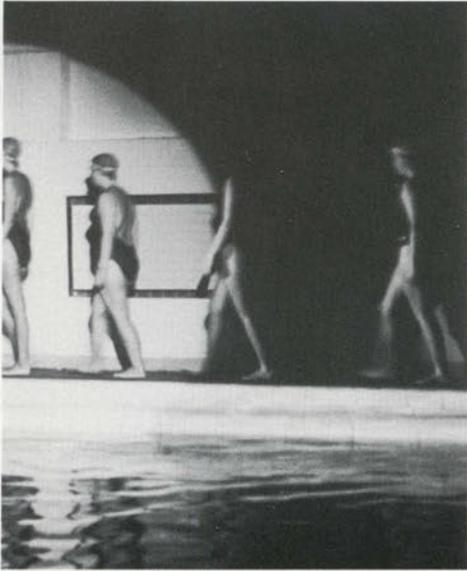


Marcelle Van Bommel
Peeneewally
Flaxman Gallery, September 23-24

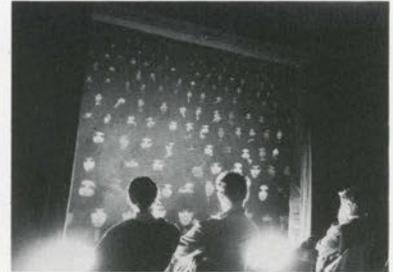


Tina Keane
The Diver
Ironmonger Row Swimming Baths, September 24-25

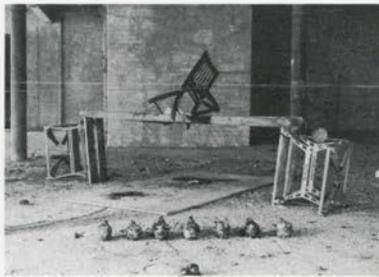
ntal art biennale, took place in the Clerkenwell
the 25th of September.
stated.)



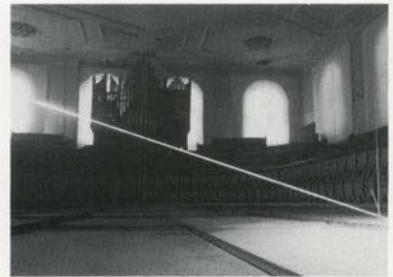
Vera Frenkel
*The Business of Frightened Desires
(or the Making of a pornographer)*
Air Gallery, September 13-15



Ian Breakwell
The Auditorium
8, Berry St, September 13-25



Stuart Brisley
Bourgeois Manners — Brute Force and Bloody Ignorance
8, Northburgh St, September 13-25



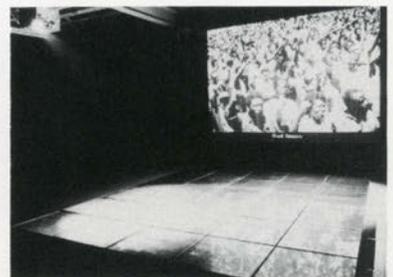
Helen Chadwick
Blood Hyphen
Woodbridge Chapel, September 13-25



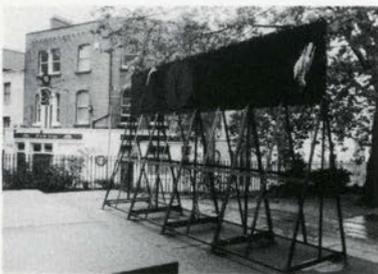
Paul Wong
Self-Winding
8, Northburgh St, September 23



Rose Garrard
Out Of Line
Slaughterhouse Gallery, September 13-25



Mona Hatoum
Reflections on Value
8, Northburgh St, September 13-25



Denis Masi
Screen
St James Church, September 13-25



Silvia Ziranek
Aloha Clerkenwell and a Couple of Cardis
City University, September 17



Jerzy Beres
(untitled performance)
Slaughterhouse Gallery, September 19

NEW WORK NEWCASTLE '88

HELEN CADWALLEDER reviews new commissioned works by women artists at this years festival.

THIS YEARS ANNUAL festival *New Work Newcastle '88* in association with *Edge '88*, organised by the Newcastle based arts-organisation Projects UK has once again maintained its importance as a national event established by previous years to present exciting original commissions from not only established artists but artists whose pieces here marked their first public commission.

The fourteen events presented over the past five weeks saw an impressive array of both international and nationally renowned artists such as Ulrike Rosenbach, Rose Garrard, Zbigniew Warpechowski, Carolee Schneeman and Alistair MacLennan most of whose work had been newly commissioned for *Edge '88*, although MacLennan produced a new piece specifically for *New Work Newcastle*. The remaining six newly commissioned pieces were produced by Pauline Cummins, Fran Cotel, Liz Rideal whilst for Louise Wilson, Kathy Lockey and Alexa Wright this marked their first public piece having all left college only a year ago.

New Work Newcastle; Edge '88 can be distinguished from the previous festivals in roughly three ways. One difference was the lack of any educational programme unlike last year which had seen, for example, workshops for sixth-formers on performance art, all being supported by the Tyne and Wear Museum Services. This year apparently invitations to develop the festi-

al in a similar way were refused by the museum services. Subsequent attempts by outside groups such as the 'Newcastle Women Artists and Critics', group to initiate a series of talks by many of the visiting women artists were unfavourably dealt with by the museum services and hindered also by the new 'profit-orientation' policies of the Regional Arts Association. Although through the support of Projects UK, one talk by Pauline Cummins was organised. The lack of educational support saw the unfortunate waste of a potential bonus to contextualise the festival and thereby open this work to a wider audience. However this was more than compensated for by the second crucial difference with previous festivals which had relied on more traditional institutionalised support systems such as the Laing art-gallery. Instead all the live-action events and installations were based at locations around the city centre or the Tyne and Wear region.

In part this could account for the festival being more firmly located in Newcastle unlike last year which saw the festival later tour Manchester and Bradford. Although this year saw a greater emphasis on installation work (roughly half the festival) which logistically would have proved difficult to tour whilst also being more suited to non-institutionalised sites. As Jon Bewley, project organiser at Projects UK cited this difference as crucial, stating, 'The reason why the

works have been so successful is because the locations have been so good', adding 'I think artists respond very positively to sites which they have to work at'.

It is this approach under-pinning the entire organisation of this years festival extending the refreshing initiative set by *Edge '88*, which highlights a more invigorating criteria by which to present large-scale performance festivals. Obviously this poses a more challenging context by which to view and understand the work which also allows the presentation of more controversial themes and issue based subject matter less subject to the potential of being compromised or recuperated within institutionalised structures.

The final difference characterising this years festival was the increased proportion of women artists work (regardless of any equal opportunity criteria) which constituted nine out of the total fourteen events, marking an increase in previous years which was this proportion around half of the seasons total events. Although an interesting feature this need not suggest a widespread similarity in issue or theme to be articulated solely from a feminist perspective. Instead one common tendency saw these works articulated from a personalised perspective to either draw directly on personal experiences, or through the use of the artists own image, or through the collective collaboration of a group of women.

The performance *Images of Women*, by Alexa Wright explored the disparity between the reality of womens perception of their own appearances and those desired images as projected and maintained by the mass media and society itself through the group collaboration of adolescent local girls own experiences. The location, a richly decorated reception room of bright red carpet and over-stated floral print decor at the Royal Station Hotel was ideal for the introductory sequence of a fashion show, which began an intensely-pitched performance packed with memorable images and sequences which cleverly synchronised live-action with a video. Pleasure in the form of black humour i.e. irony and satire in particular marked the underlying strategy of this piece. A good example of this occurred in the sequence which saw thiw group adopt the same robotic like pose whilst receiving 'essential' beauty treatment to then parade around the floor in wigs and false nails only to assume a fixed 'alluring' pose. The unreality of this process was foregrounded by the soundtrack of each girl giving a list of personal grievances over their appearance such as 'My body is disproportionate ... lumps and bumps all over the place ... I shouldn't be bothered by it but I am'. This ironic juxtaposition

Alexa Wright, *Images of Women*



PHOTO. / STEVE COLLINS



Louise Wilson, *Warm Seas*

of soundtrack and live-action was not only humorous but also demonstrated the obvious 'doublebind' women often find themselves in by being trapped between the reality of their actual appearance and the desire to emulate more idealised images ('I just want to look better than I do, I just want to look beautiful'). Although the final sequence when we saw the bride literally tear her own idealised image apart offered a grimly dramatic conclusion to such incessant contradictions.

Another project which depended on the collaboration of a group of some fifty women this time a one-off unrehearsed event was *A Meeting Outside Time* by Fran Cottel. The artist felt that a women only group would benefit most from her aim to '... enact a ritual symbolic of a sense of common tireless humanity ...', in contrast to '... a short-term political materialist expediency' by which women in particular are too often associated. The group, myself included travelled from Newcastle city centre to a moorland part of Northumberland National Park near Hexham. Through my own experience, I felt the smaller groups into which we all disbanded to follow one of three routes to later rejoin on the moorland site was one of the highlights of the event. This offered a means to symbolically 'leave-behind' untenable aspects of twentieth century life written on coloured stakes along the way but also a chance to talk with everyone in the particular group. By contrast the large communal meeting proved slightly awkward on occasions in maintaining the momentum of the suggested events e.g. exchanging coloured scarves aimed to encourage more mixing but within such a large group, this seemed more impersonal, although everyone participated in the communal meal.

Although I have my reservations of the overall effectiveness of such large participation-based

events, I did feel that by the end of the day and yet another chance to talk on the walk back, this event was successful in providing women the opportunity to meet up and share common experiences.

By contrast *Unearthed*, by Pauline Cummins posed a more traditional relationship between 'the artist' and 'audience'. Dressed in black traditional Irish clothes suggesting mourning, Pauline Cummins sat to the left of a large screen in front of which the audience gathered to watch and be drawn into the well-structured, enthralling, yet disturbing narrative set to some equally haunting slide images and soundtrack. This location of a large empty low-ceilinged darkened space at Riverside established a scenario of bleakness and apprehension further reinforced by the night-time stormy weather outside. In this way Pauline Cummins offered a very personal impression of the conflicts in Northern Ireland and the struggle to realise and articulate some form of cultural identity. As in the introduction Pauline Cummins announced 'Irish? Me? I'm not Irish ...' questioning yet also mocking as spoken in Irish tones. A series of disturbing narrative images effectively evoked the deep sense of emotional trauma and violence part of the Irish 'situation' produced through a range of devices such as an apparently inane joke querying 'What's a hedgehog', producing the reply, 'It's the hood ... over the head ... with a bullet through it'. A similar emotional dramatic charge was achieved when in outlining the 'keening' a yell to alert residents in catholic communities of terrorist invaders Pauline Cummins emulated this call of 'MURDERER' with gut wrenching effect. The slide images complemented the narrative perfectly through the two sources of clay masks and self-portraits. The raquo-fired clay masks retained the pre-kiln colour of the clay as a deep

green-grey, offering a direct association with the mud preserved remains of the bog people. Whilst the glazes in blacks and blues slashed across these faces seemed reminiscent of wounds or scars acquired by victims from burns or violence. The whitened head and shoulder self-portraits with mud-darkened hands obscuring the facial features again posed a visual metaphor of a cultural identity obscured. Whilst the lush green rural settings into which the masks were displayed may have seemed overly romanticised yet this also posed the notion of some pagan pre-Christian spirituality as part of Irish traditional culture as evidenced in the concluding narrative. A dream-like stream of imagery tapped this hidden reality of past Irish history, peoples and culture, of ghosts-in-the-machine', rising up to pose an unresolved situation 'They've been through it all before. It's all before us'.

Again Louise Wilson in her installation *Warm-Seas*, also referred to 'Big' political issues i.e. the nuclear power industry but in combination with specific feminist debates surrounding the appropriation of madness/hysteria with femininity/women in certain visual discourses through the personalised means of using her own image. These visual discourses were referred to through the two main sources of self-referential imagery contained in a vast water-tank which dominated the dimly lit warehouse space of Ouseborn workshops. The first in the form of a lifesize monochrome image of the artist wearing a surgical gown directly addressing the viewer which was screen-printed onto a flimsy fabric sheet pinned down beneath the water by missile-shaped lead weights inferring obvious 'phallic' connotations. This was obviously the 'mad-woman' as typified in much later nineteenth century psychiatric photography e.g. Charcots work. This also conflated the

second visual discourse again capitalised upon in fine-art painting of the same period i.e. the Pre-Raphaelite painter Millais's painting of Ophelia the 'mad-woman' drowning beneath the water. The second source of images in the form of a rapid succession of colour slides projected over the screen-print also tapped this visual discourse. The artist adopted the same pose, this time in a rural setting whilst sporting a bunch of flowers, thereby drawing more directly on the *Ophelia* painting by Millais. Whilst one 'narrative' posed the related Ophelia theme of sexual violation seen from the presence of an anonymous boiler-suited man. These slides drew the sinister connection between femininity and madness with the mass-media tendency to describe concern over the present-day nuclear industry as a form of 'neurotic hysteria'. Slide texts drew this analogy, albeit ambiguously in references such as 'mother-atom' and 'fission-daughter'. Whilst various details in the darkened warehouse such as the gothic round-arched, blue U.V.A. lit frame offered a visually seductive image only to be made more insidious when one learned this was part of the publicity logo designed for Sellarfield.

Overall, Louise Wilson's work was an ambitious piece which successfully addressed the obvious problematic built into the 'representation of women' too often presented as the 'Other', through the metaphorical use of representations of 'mad-women'.

Another powerful work was Kathy Lockey's *Silences*. The site chosen skilfully conflated two important themes; the domestic sphere of social life and present-day institutionalised medical system, by being based in a domestic building (a Georgian terrace) within the grounds of the Royal Victoria Infirmary. Yet the sense of domestic informality anticipated by such an environment was immediately denied on entering the building as a sign indicated 'Wait in room number One until it is your turn to enter room number two', thereby demonstrating an institutionalised system to order and control individual behaviour. Although everyone entering immediately complied with these instructions exemplifying one main concern of this installation how in a wider context forms of authority and control are too often upheld without question. Spending only a few moments in the waiting room which proved 'too much' in terms of visual detail which seemed to spill out of the available space, coupled with a multi-layered soundtrack detailing aspects of women's lives and assumed roles I then entered the second room ('Only one person at a time in this room'). The entire space was dominated by four large cubicles which contained and ordered the presentation of different settings referring to either the public sphere in the form of a hospital ward or to different aspects of life typically associated with women i.e. baby-feeding gear = mother/housewife. The subdued lighting and complete silence conferred a meditative and tranquil atmosphere. The apparent beauty of this environment was undermined to expose a more sinister element when focusing on details. For example the first cubicle of western medical



PHOTO / HELEN CADWALLADER

care displayed small oval resin-coated plastic bags piled beneath the trolley bed which offered a direct reference to female genitalia. This posed a disturbing contrast with one of the real objects used in the piece, a man's razor, placed nearby, a small but brutal reminder that this was a women's ward in a quite literally phallogocentric male dominated medical system. The feminist subject-matter was reinforced in the presentation of the work as Kathy Lockey apparently tapped earlier '70's feminist art-approaches to counter dominant sculpture by using materials of a transient, ephemeral nature as in this case plaster casts of real objects.

In view of these often disparate themes in such a selected number of artists work, it is clear that this year's festival has staked an important move away from depending on more traditional institutionalised support systems. Future events can only be further reinforced by sustained media attention which can serve to encourage new artists work which both benefits from and regularly offers the unexpected highlights of this festival. ●

Kathy Lockey, *Silences*



PHOTO / STEVE COLLINS

Alexa Wright, *Images of Women*

STEVE SHILL

A Fine Film of Ashes,
Green Room, Manchester.

Reviewed by
TIM ETCHELLS

LEAVING IMPACT AFTER *The Carrier Frequency*, Steve Shill has taken his work in a different, perhaps almost opposite direction. *Carrier Frequency* was a kind of explosion, taking actions out of context, showing not the detail but a picture of our exaggerated hearts. It went after the essence of our world by ignoring its surface. By contrast Steve has taken small and detailed fictional worlds and virtually imploded them. In his shows banal realities open up endlessly, not just to reveal strange images or events, but to embrace them. Indeed, the most striking and successful thing about *A Fine Film of Ashes*, created with Graeme Miller, is how it mutates cinematic naturalism to make a new theatrical poetry: easily readable since it has both feet in the 'real' world of events, but equally rooted in ideas about time, and dreams, and memory.

Shill's four pieces have shown lone or paired characters more or less pinned to the corners of their rooms, working or narrating their way through the events of the past, as present time slips away like a time lapse film. In the new show an estate agent, Michael, returns from his dad's funeral carrying a box full of ashes and a bottle of sherry. Sat in the father's house he talks to the ashes, reminiscing, complaining and regretting, as a series of phone calls mark his increasing isolation from the outside world, and the lights fade from morning to night and back

again. The set is two flats joined to make the corner of a room, a door in one of them, a window in the other. Beneath the window is a two seater sofa. Various details support the fiction; a picture on one of the walls, a 'phone on the floor, light flooding through the window as an unseen fan moves its net curtain and the branches that lie outside.

Earlier pieces, like *Dark Water Closing* and *Face Down*, used American locations for the same reasons that Jacobean revenge playwrights used Spain; in a far-away land the issue of what's plausible or real can be sidestepped and madness or romance pushed to an extreme. An America built out of years of cinema, painting, and rumour turned these pieces into little myths, not descriptions of our world but timeless pearls outside of it.

Because it's set in contemporary suburban England the new show has to work harder, to achieve this same mythic quality, but there's no question that it manages it in the end. So how is this achieved and to what effect?

The form Steve Shill has developed places moments or scenes from fictional time in front of us, one after the other, divided by blackouts, like shots in a film. The first shot in *A Fine Film of Ashes* is of Michael, pressed hard against the door and relating some childhood incident. In the second shot the room is empty, late afternoon sunlight spills through the curtains. In the third Michael enters, carrying the box of his father's ashes. He sits on the sofa, head in his hands. In the fourth shot it's night-time and the man's on his hands and knees, banging the floorboards with a hammer. In the fifth he's at the door, talking to himself, aiming the odd remark to the box of ashes.

In the end it's the pace within and the relative duration of these shots, as well as their content, that creates the tone and meaning of the piece.

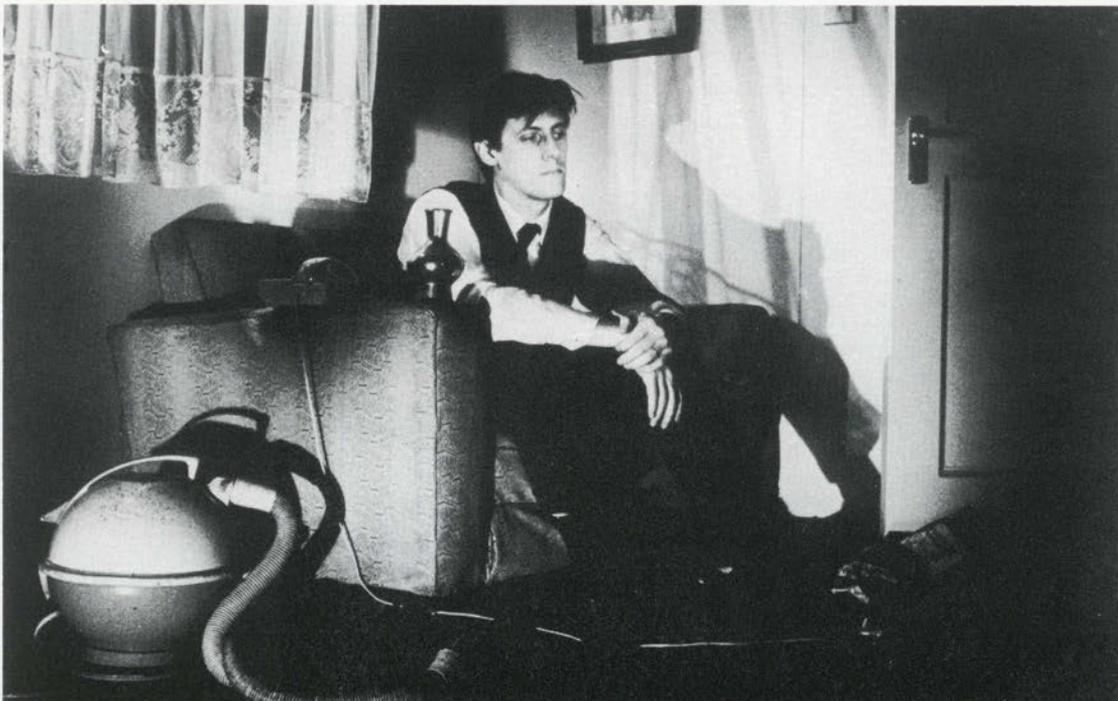
Although all the shots are naturalistic unto themselves they're not in sequential order. As the pieces goes on we're more aware of these gentle loops and irregularities, though the basic flow of the narrative, and of time, remains unchecked.

Further to these aberrations we see various surreal intrusions into the world, They're introduced, or at least excused, narratively. When the man cracks his world cracks too. Michael gets possessed by the spirit of his father, who demands they play some cricket. 'Dad . . . Dad, not now . . .' he pleads 'There isn't room.' Later Shill slips behind the drapes that frame the set and returns to sit on the sofa, glum and naked except a huge dunce's cap. More events like this follow, cut up and into the naturalism. Most resonant is the image that marks the climax of the piece; Michael squatted on the floor of the darkened room trailing his fingers in a pool of water that removal of the floorboards has revealed. These images find echoes in the text but are never realistically explained, instead they work with the narrative material to make a haunting picture of a man whose world and perception of himself is in crisis.

As a by-product of these surreal images we're made to reassess what's gone before. Shill's tall frame fills the tiny set like a puppet theatre, he looks almost as estranged from it as he does from his character. He's one of those performers, like Jack Nicholson, who seem to create fluid quotation marks and brackets round themselves, so they're by turns distant from and then completely involved in their characters. It's a good device, and one which *A Fine Film of Ashes* uses well because as the actor goes from distance to involvement the audience is pulled along behind; laughing and then biting one's lip.

Backed by Graeme Miller's soundtrack the actual and the psychological elements of the narrative are held in a kind of perfect suspension. There are disappointments; some of the text is clumsy and references to things such as 'the local Asda' feel like they're trying a bit hard. I wanted Michael and his world to be pushed further too, there was a sense that once at the waterside there was nothing left to do. But despite these things it's an excellent crystallisation to Steve Shill's work since *Impact*, unique, complex and articulate, like a series of photographs of an England that doesn't exist . . . holding humour, sadness and warmth in its hands. ●

PERFORMANCE
REVIEW



Steve Shill, *A Fine Film of Ashes*

MANACT

Radio Sing Sing, Leadmill,
Sheffield Nov 88

Reviewed by
TIM ETHELLS

IN *RADIO SING SING* Simon Thorne and Philip Mackenzie represent the characters of Geoffrey Mortimer, a pragmatic Australian gold prospector and Stanley Crumb, a British Scientist intent on a journey into the Papua New Guinean interior.

The space is beautifully lit, the floor painted like black and white tiles, the men dressed in black dinner suits and ties. Here, in a variety of styles they recount a past tense narrative about their journey together; sometimes addressing the audience, sometimes using dialogue from the past, and sometimes using more abstract movement section involving dance and large bundles of sticks.

In the story which is retold before us the

relationship between the two men becomes strained as they journey further and further into the jungle. Geoffrey Mortimer wants to search for gold and to exploit the natives that they meet, whilst Stanley Crumb apparently wants to leave the natives unmolested and to get on with his research.

This moral antagonism crystallises when the bearers desert and leave the two men stranded in the jungle.

My first feeling was one of pleasure at seeing Man Act continue to address the theme of male friendships which has always been the basis of their work. It was very rewarding, to see them here as two such skilled and confident performers, handling pace and character with the real control and understanding that only comes with years of ensemble work.

Radio Sing Sing was directed by Steve Shill and, like his own recent work, it explores a simple story. To some extent it uses the journey of the two men into the interior as a metaphor for a journey by the west towards its own political and psychological inhumanity. It's a powerful motif with significant contemporary implications, but it's territory that's been well charted and I found Man Act's handling of it, although discreet, rather straight faced. In *A Fine Film of Ashes* (reviewed elsewhere in this issue) Shill combined a tiny modernist narrative, believed in and cared for, with a very pleasurable sense that at a certain level the whole thing was functioning as an ironic quotation. In *Radio Sing*

Sing there is some awareness of the found nature of the narrative, but I wanted to be surer that the piece knew about, and was dealing with its relationship to Conrad, Kipling, Herzog and Coppola as much as it was dealing with its ideas about its own fictional world.

This apparent lack of self-consciousness in content was reflected in the theatrical construction of the piece which moved between time and location a bit to carelessly. In one breath the characters would be addressing the audience directly and in the next they'd be 'in the jungle' talking to one another as though they had no idea they were now being, or had ever been, observed. The psychological gear change necessary for both audience and performers in these transitions was sometimes very distancing, and resulted in a sense of confusion which was frustrating rather than engaging.

Such confusion was heightened by a certain lack of clarity in the space. Although the characters were clearly in the process of re-telling their own story for themselves, I was never entirely sure where, in fictional time or space they were meant to be as this happened.

Despite reservations about *Radio Sing Sing's* lack of self-awareness I did find it quite successful on a smaller, human level. The endlessly mutating foxtrot dances were very comical and dialogue and movement sections were done with an exemplary detail and sensitivity that enlivened and made resonant even the simplest material. ●

NOMINATIAE FILIAE

A Magdalena Project
production, Chapter Arts
Centre.

Reviewed by SIMON
THORNE.

HERE WE HAVE a production by the Magdalena Project. An international cast of women dedicated to the excavation and celebration of a woman's language in theatre. And yet for me the most memorable image is a sterile one. A white circle painted on the floor and a carousel of women dancing around it. Their dance is a celebration but of what? Their own hysteria? Six women; a painter and her painted subjects who have stepped down from their canvasses to circle endlessly and mechanically. Six women whose endless circular wailing is a mournful indictment of the images that have snared them. The images themselves are all the more terrifying for their cliché and their devastating lack of potency. And so the circle remains unbroken.

The nub of the drama that *Nominatae Filiae* plays out is the process of naming itself. Rage at the mechanisms at work in naming the girl child. Rage at the roots of women's oppression. Rage not at the pragmatic practicalities of a woman's existence but at the root sources defining her creative impulse. The Magdalena Project has set itself the task of excavating language. Laudible in the declared dangerous search for an originality but here perhaps not daring enough. Here the original still masquerades in her second hand clothes. And perhaps that is the point.

There is a frustrating lack of the specific here. The drama of a painter haunted by the ghosts of her creative blocks as she struggles to redefine an all-embracing image of her womanhood is curiously undramatic. The obsessive neuroses of the women who inhabit her images are given their poignancy by their setting. They are Pre Raphaelite, they are Lorca's women and they are Freud's women. In the quest for a biological essentialism they are perhaps most strongly Jung's women. At any rate they are nineteenth century women, products of a persistent Romantic imagination. The carousel rides along to a persistent valse triste which I am sure I recognised. I think it

might have been Tchaikovsky.

These are all women whose sex is not their own. The most accessible personality amidst them all: the Artist's Model who is timeless and endlessly recurrent, whose lovers are endless and endlessly creative, whose manhood is unquestionable because they permit her to bask in the reflected glamour of an artistic ideal. How does she earn her living? She specialises in suicide poses. The others have not even come close to the instinct for survival that his woman's self deprecation displays. Their masochistic recreation of some of the more lurid representations of womanhood drawn from the iconography of western art is all the more distressing.

At this point I am forced to acknowledge that under the direction of Sophia Kalinska the work is culturally specific almost to the point of being hermetic. It is wholly Eurocentric in its version of art history. More specifically it is Polish. Again, given Ms Kalinska's association with Tadeusz Kantor, I suspect depths of autobiography that I am not party to. Her proclaimed celebration of the denomic woman strikes me as nostalgic. The performance style draws on a well understood style of expressionist physical commitment. And yet all of the madonnas, virgins, brides, whores, widows, angels and deposed saviours portray an overwhelming sadness; the sight of mothers and daughters herded together, meekly lobotomised, their hysterical rage hysterectomised and sterilised.

No new celebration of wild women here. ●



PHOTO / STEVE SHILL

Manact, *Radio Sing Sing*

IT WOULD BE hard to imagine any circumstance in which putting a naked female go-go dancer at the front of the stage as a gratuitous decoration would be acceptable. The Butthole Surfers did just this and more.

The whole performance, largely of material from their current *Hairway to Steven* record, was at the very least an exercise in cultural disorientation and transgression. They play at very high volumes with an emphasis on the bass so that your whole body vibrates. They play in virtual darkness, the only light coming from the two 16mm film projectors on which they showed, side by side, a documentary of a sex change operation, a grand prix car race and episodes of *Charlies Angels*, backwards and upside down. Their lyrics concentrate on sexual and homicidal maniacs, satanism, mental and physical deformity, and anything that can still retain any hint of taboo. Add to that the naked dancer and the result is a violent disruption of any sensitivities.

It would be far too easy to write the Butthole Surfers off as nothing more than the rock and roll equivalent to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Certainly they appeal to a metropolitan audience of adrenalin addicts, and certainly they exploit the cult/mass appeal of being nastier than anyone else. Nastiness can however, as John Waters and Divine proved, be both comic and subversive, for the Buttholes are, like Waters, motivated by a simple, moral rage.

The music itself is a collage of a number of recognisable popular musical styles the most prominent and telling of which is country and western which is never very far away even in their most chaotically anti-musical 'songs'. This gives the music a feel that locates it unequivocally in the rural music of the midwest and south.

BUTTHOLE SURFERS

This is also the environment most frequently used as the background to the whole Texas Chainsaw genre, whether it be the self-consciously arty *Deliverance* or the comic strip video nasty, *The Hills Have Eyes*. The southern states of America have produced a large body of art, in various media which shows the results of constraining human passion, stimulated beyond endurance by the sweltering climate, within the rigid and intolerant code of strict protestant belief.

The Texas Chainsaw movie genre is only one particularly visible part of this output, another would be the literary tradition that includes Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty and Richard Ford, another is the great body of white blues country music itself with its emphasis on domestic and familial order threatened by powerful and uncontrollable emotions. All of these share a common assertion that such frustration coupled with geographical isolation, and often with social deprivation, results in a hatred of humanity which can explode into madness and violence.

The Butthole Surfers are a part of this body of work. Their lyrics usually follow a familiar vein of country songs but with the marital breakup being taken to the most nightmarish lengths of sexual and physical violence, Tammy Wynette trapped in that notorious house on Elm Street. The collage techniques used frequently rely on

Brixton Academy, London
Reviewed by
STEVE ROGERS

the creation of a pastoral mood in order that the violation, when it inevitably comes, is all the more transgressive. The overt use of these kinds of b-movie cliches makes it clear that country music, and the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* are not so much the form as the content, the very subject of their songs. When they appear to celebrate sexual violence within the family they are in fact making a powerful and ironic assault on the movies and popular music which celebrates such violence. By taking the cliches to their most violent extremes they are making us aware of how immune we have become to images of violence and transgression and also just how bland and ineffectual popular music has become. What this music achieves, and it is no mean achievement, is to stimulate a feeling of moral rage, and you can dance to it as well. ●



GLORIA

Lady Audley's Secret
Reviewed by
PIPPA CORNER.

REVIEW

I FOUND THIS show extremely seductive: entertaining; beautifully designed and meticulously staged; agreeably lurid, glossy and sensual; accompanied to perfection by Nicolas Bloomfield's score which gives the impression of an easy extemporisation from Victorian melodies. Annie Griffin, as Lady Audley, is, as always, entrancing. Her portrayal of a woman playing that most uncomfortable of parts, a lady, is delicate in detail and powerfully concentrated.

In fact I began to wonder if I wasn't being offered something of a solo performance. In this confusing, hostile environment where nothing is quite as it should be, I was on Lady Audley's side right from the start. I didn't care about her past, or who she might kill to protect it, I was under her spell. Her loneliness and social discomfort, as well as her determination to conquer weakness and cover her tracks, are foregrounded so effectively in the first half of the show that when it falls to her self-righteous nephew Robert Audley (Neil Bartlett), to move upstage and investigate her sinister behaviour, he hasn't got a hope. As the shadow of suspicion falls across her, literally as well as figuratively, she still shines. Equally, as she is systematically stripped of the trappings of her newfound class, wealth and power by her black-

mailing servant Phoebe (Leah Hausman), she thrives in sensuality and self-possession. She characterises a conviction and thus a credibility which outstrips her antagonists.

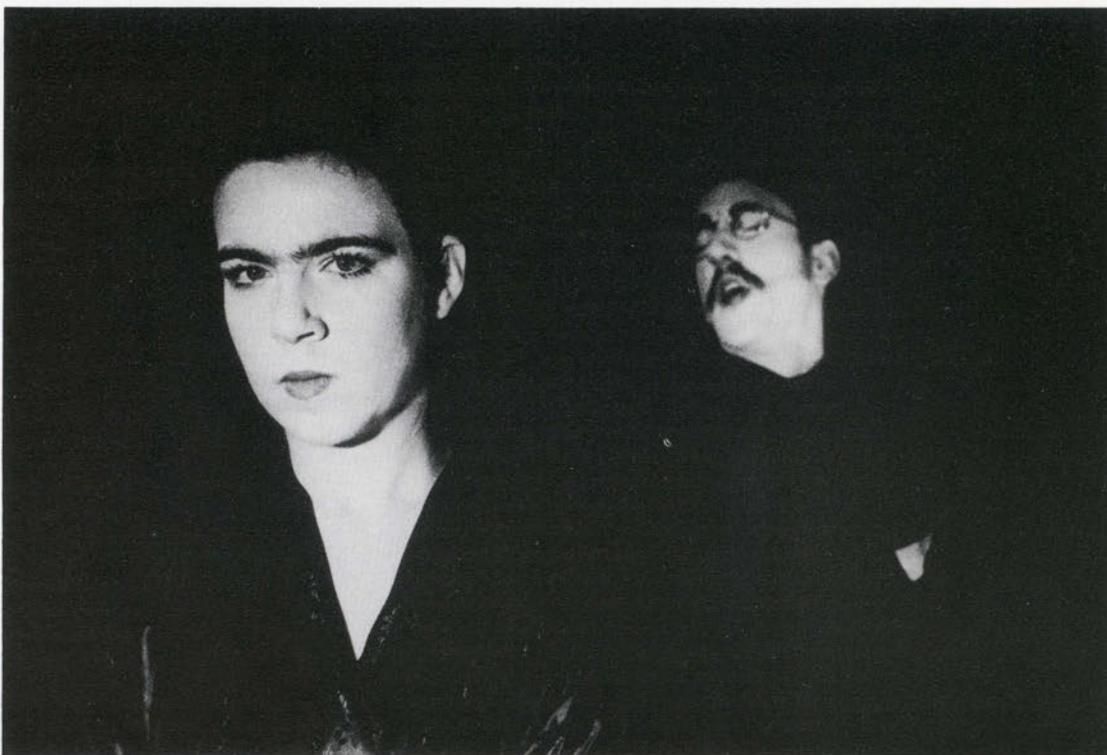
The show is celebratory of melodrama (camp?), and I wonder if this might be a pitfall. The programme offers a technical definition of the genre to which the production adheres, but this does not take account of the modern connotations which relegate the form to an intellectual fourth division. I felt that there was an unhelpful tension between their own crucial commentary at the heart of the work and the inarticulacy of such sensational expression. I had the uneasy awareness that somewhere along the line I was missing the point. But then as Lady Audley herself repeatedly asserts: "it can take years to understand music."

The complex relationship between the two women does well from this formal contradiction. One woman lifts herself to power by shrewdly swapping her first husband for a better one, but gets caught out in the process, while the other gives away the resulting upturn in her power by marrying her brute of a cousin. The falseness of their particular maid/mistress relationship, that mutual dependence bond between the blackmailer and the blackmailed, creates a changing map of pathetic, compassionate and despicable behaviour in which one basic rule is understood: every woman for herself, up to a point.

The relationship between the two men somehow gets lost along the way, and I felt this was a missed opportunity within the piece. There is an air of homosexual proclivity, with all the uncertain and clandestine moves which that implies. I wanted more

tragedy from Robert Audley in his unspeakable and ambiguous attraction for his heterosexual friend (old school chum, George Talboys, first husband of our heroine, played by Luke Williams). ie the torment of a proscribed love which must be hidden, even from its object, within the assumed "nobility" of some Victorian concept of the platonic ideal. Poor Audley dedicates himself first to the hopeless task of replacing a supposedly dead wife in George's affections, next to the simple task of uncovering the mystery of George's affections, and next to the simple task of uncovering the mystery of George's own supposed death, an activity which allows him to vent misogynist spleen. [While it makes a kind of sense for one man to play both Talboys and Marks (Phoebe's husband), it was a pragmatic rather than a dramatic decision, not entirely happy within a plot already rife with coincidence.]

The plot balances individual crisis against the demands of an overriding moral and social principal. Unusually it is the women who provide the selfish alternative, instead of the model of the self-sacrificing angel in the house. The women take their needs seriously, no matter how subversive. The men clasp their inadequate moral monochrome to their breasts, determined to do the right thing, as highlighted in the closing denouncements. However, the piece is not simply oppositional. It is consistently thrown from its historical axis by the disruption of the illusion, with performers breaking out into contemporary aphorisms. The work is set within the parenthesis of an altogether different Lady Audley, unspecifically modern. And all the while it is this music which is so hard to understand which will have the last word. ●



Annie Griffin and Neil Bartlett in *Lady Audley's Secret*

PHOTO / STEPHEN SWEET

TONY WHITE

Bullring Shopping Centre, Birmingham.
Reviewed by Roy Bayfield.

DOES ANYONE EVER come away from a train journey *without* an anecdote to tell? The nutcase who insists on conversing with you for 200 miles . . . that awful family sitting opposite . . . what happened when the Millwall fans got on? Tony White's *Strangers on a Train* is an anthology of such tales, compiled after making several dozen train journeys between Sheffield and Birmingham one week in July.

He was commissioned to undertake this Quixotic travel-performance by the Inter City 88 Festival. The product of this imaginative brief was his simplest and strongest piece yet, performed at the Bullring shopping centre, Birmingham and the Orchard Centre, Sheffield.

In a piece about communication (as in travel, as in language) we heard about

White's brief intersections with his fellow traveller's lives, their stories: "I ask you Tony, a sailor marrying a girl called Mayday, it had to be a bloody disaster." There was not a great deal about the two cities, just the tracts in between. He gave us jokes, half-jokes, no-jokes: all within the implicit 'joke' framework of his absurd journeying. This should have been made more clear somehow, so that the passers-by lured to listen could have at least some idea why they were being regaled with these mundanely fascinating snippets. White seems to have been quite 'lucky' in the number of eccentric passengers using that particular stretch of permanent way, ranging from the lad who was being sent to Lemington Spa by his firm on a course in how to lose his Sunderland accent, to "The man who was sitting alone with 14 empty cans of lager in front of him: I sat down and introduced myself: no response."

The thing is, was it 14 empty cans, or was it just 10, or 6? I suspect the former. Indeed, at times it seemed that White was sticking too closely to a 'documentary' form, when a bit more playfulness with relative truth could have freed the piece more.

Tony White's performance persona is open, engaging, and somewhat vulnerable. During the worst moments, it can be a bit like waiting for a stammerer to finish a word when you already know what the word is, but

these moments are very rare. In a performance that relies largely on reports of other people for comic effect or, occasionally, to make a political point, there is a necessary collusion with the audience in which we all have to agree that the described 'other' is amusing, wrong, freakish. Otherwise, the game doesn't work. Now and again, it seemed that White was forcing this effect too glibly, deploying a sort of sarky cabaret smugness which I do not feel he needs. He says he is trying to lose his 'Mr Nice Guy' image: surely an impossible task.

At the Bullring, he had to confront a vast, bustling two-tier shopping centre, armed only with his denim suit, microphone and tape of 'Trains and Boats and Planes'. In Sheffield, by contrast, he was hidden away in an unfinished part of a similar edifice, out of range of passers-by: a too-perfect replica of an art space. Although the second performance was more polished and focussed, the foolhardy confrontation of the Bullring performance was more of an *event*; it somehow had more of that 'performance art' stuff in it.

His fallible demonstration, words rising into the processed air, made a memorable contrast with the oppressive kaleidoscope of signs, the late-80s marketing mall and all that it assumes about the people within it. A bit more than a rag-bag of anecdotes, it seemed to invoke human possibility. ●



PHOTO / DAN WOODTON

Tony White
Strangers on a Train

THEATRE ON A STRING

Brighton Festival. Reviewed by ARIANE KOEK.

'THEATRE ON A STRING' this year headed Brighton Festival's lack-lustre performance section with two productions also shown at this year's Glasgow Mayfest: *Ballet Macabre*, based on Bertoldt Brecht's *Irresistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, and the children's production, *Dreamworld*.

This Czechoslovakian company, founded in 1965 by students from the Janacek Academy of Fine Arts, Brno, is dedicated to creating an explorative, improvisatory theatre for young performers, directors and producers. The name, Theatre on a String reflects the playfulness of their theatre: who is controlling whom and pulling the strings—the theatre or the audience? Or is the question irrelevant, in a theatre which in form and content seeks to expose the falsity of such boundaries?

With *Ballet Macabre*, Theatre on a String seems to have lost some of its exploratory impetus. The Brechtian parable, about the puppet dictator and the corruption of power,

controls the performance to the point of simplification and strangulation. Rather than layer upon layer of meaning, each challenging the other and forcing the audience to confront their own prejudices and expectations, *Ballet Macabre* reduces the audience to being cosy spectators of the spectacle of Arturo Ui's rise and fall.

What originality there is, is in the riotous combination of mime, ballet, farce, music hall and circus routines which convey this spectacle, with very little dialogue.

But by using the framework of a play, which arguably is part of the inherited Western collective consciousness, all tension, impact and inventiveness is lost.

When the figure of the cleaner moves forward and confidentially whispers to the audience 'Don't believe anything you see. It's only a spectacle,' we are witnessing the familiar Brechtian theatrical device of alienation.

Whereas Brecht's fable worked in conventional theatre as an explosive and innovative political parody of the Morality Play, in Theatre on a String's performance piece it has limited impact. The company takes Brecht's fable totally on board without ques-

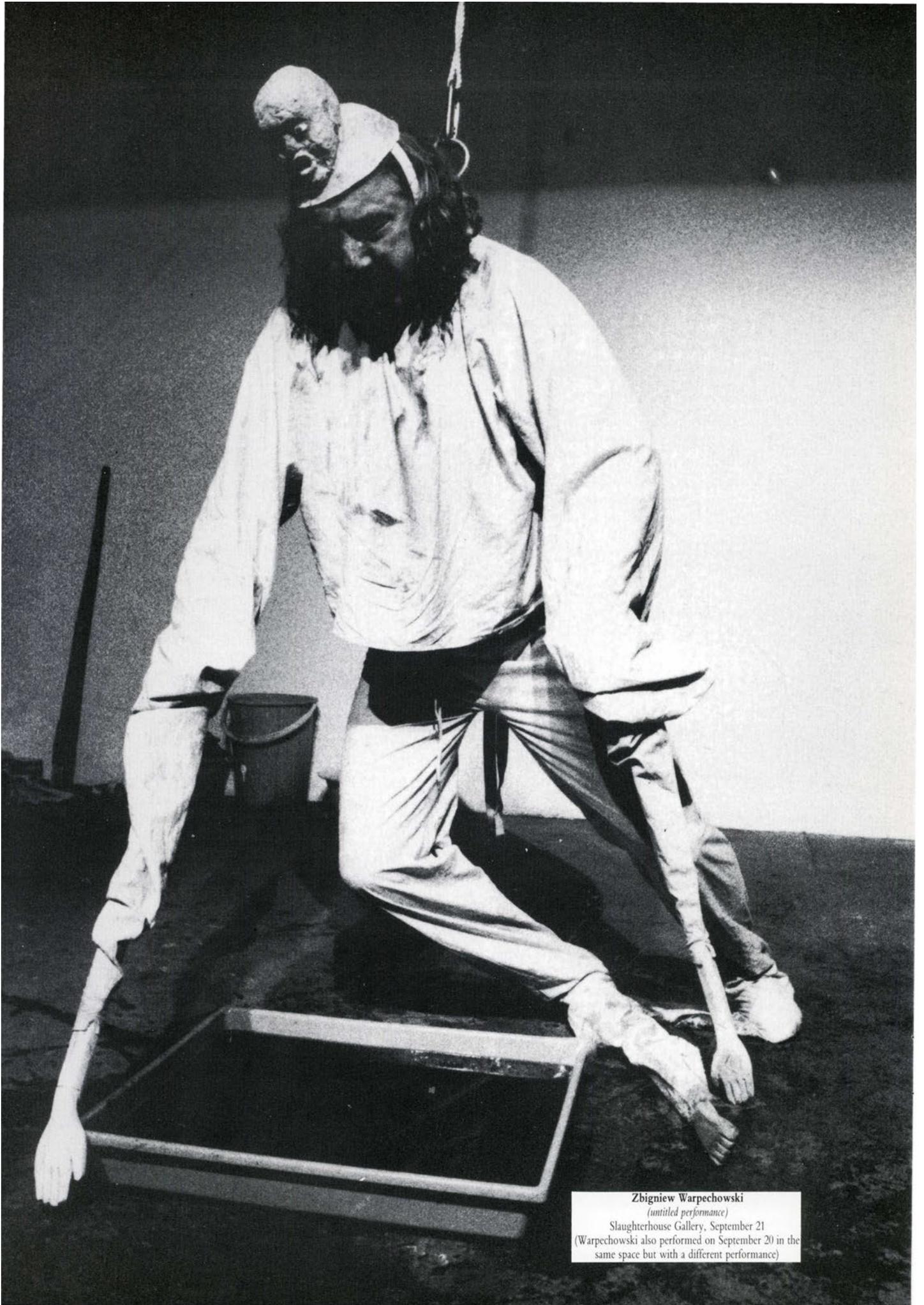
tion, and in return offers no new insights or challenges to its existing readings.

Similarly, in the children's experimental theatre piece, *Dreamworld*, the traditional fairy tale structure dominates at the cost of innovation. The evil are undoubtedly wicked, although they can be the source of fun and laughter too, as embodied by the squirming witch and her cronies, the cavorting crows. And the good, as embodied by the prince and the Apple Maiden are sugary sweet and whiter than white cardboard characters.

There is no attempt to challenge existing ideology. The witch, writhing her body, represents a sexuality forbidden in the moral world of the fairy tale, and must be destroyed. The Apple Maiden on the contrary barely moves, and glides through the action showing the restraint and reserve of the good woman in her restrictive body language.

Such reactionism is doubly disappointing in a company which is one of the very few to work with children, and for them, in the experimental arena.

The problem with Theatre on a String's productions is that both accept moral frameworks which restrict the company's imagination. We are witnessing a new designer 'performance art', paying lip service to the multiplicity of art forms 'performance art' encompasses, whilst safely staying in the boundaries of the known and acceptable. ●



Zbigniew Warpechowski
(untitled performance)
Slaughterhouse Gallery, September 21
(Warpechowski also performed on September 20 in the
same space but with a different performance)

A SHORT HISTORY OF

PERFORMANCE

MAGAZINE

Issue No.	Interview	Features	Issue No.	Interview	Features
1*	Ken Campbell	Welfare State / Kipper Kids / Heartache & Sorrow	29	Gilbert & George	Ideal Home, Crufts, Boat Show / Freud & Performance / Bellringing
2*	—	Roland Miller & Shirley Cameron / Demolition Decorators / Mods / Nuttall on Money	30	Molissa Fenley	Images of Deviancy / The Wooster Group / Adult Puppetry
3*	Genesis P. Orridge	Hummer Sisters / Happenings / Performance from Poland	31	Charlie Hooker	George Bataille / Rose English / Andrei Tarkovsky
4*	Mary Longford	Academia Ruchu / Welfare State / Kaboodle Theatre	32	Yoshiko Chuma	Rose Garrard / Impact Theatre & Russell Hoban / Pornography
5+	Charlie Drake	Silvia Ziranek / Sonia Knox / Stuart Brisley & Ian Robertson	33	Stuart Brisley	Performance in Australia / Visual theatre Report / Glamour & Garbage in New York
6+	Fiona Richmond	Steve Cripps / Naked Art / Politics of Drag	34	John Jesurun	Spalding Gray / Philip Glass, Andrew Poppy, Michael Nyman / Soap Opera
7+	John Cage	Mercé Cunningham / Lumiere & Son / Tadeusz Kantor / Women's Images	35	Els Comediants	La Gaia Scienza / Peking Opera / Bow Gamelan / Winston Tong
8*	Pip Simmons	Tom Saddington / Women's Performance	36	Steve Willats / Krzysztof Wodiczko	Elvis Presley / Tom Phillips / Tina Keane
9	Ivor Cutler	Performed Music / Showbiz / San Francisco Mime Troupe	37	Bruce McLean	Performance Artists Survey / Laural & Hardy & Performance / Anna Project
10	Roland Miller & Shirley Cameron	Chris Burden / Belgian Performance / New Video	38/39+	Steve Reich / Robert Wilson	Brecht & Pop / Magic Flute / Anti-Opera / Portugese Performance
11+	Brion Gysin	Lizzie Cox / Stuart Brisley / Steve Paxton	40	Marty St James & Anne Wilson	Bow Gamelan / Anne Seagrave / Welfare State / Ian Munro / Deep Sea Diver / Critics
12	—	Cabaret Futura / Richard Layzell / State Performances / Artists Enquiry into Art	41	Laurie Anderson	Mona Hatoum / Tara Babel / Video Special / Jan Fabre
13	Roland Muldoon	Gay Culture & Performance / Theatre of the 8th Day / Gilbert & George / Provisorium	42	Rose English	Australian Special Issue / Magdalena Festival / New Arts Consort
14	Laurie Anderson	Acme Gallery / Miranda Tufnell / Music in Performance	43	—	Rose Finn-Kelcey / Artists in the Theatre / Furniturisation / Stuart Brisley / Carnival
15+	Yoshi Oida	Magic & Performance / Sex & Public Spectacle / Station House Opera	44/45+	Mark Pauline	Photography & Performance / An Artist in Nicaragua / J.S. Boggs / Women & Sculpture
16+	Andre Stitt	Video Libraries / Circus Lumiere / Forkbeard Fantasy	46	Anthony D'Offay / Richard Demarco	Conrad Atkinson / Robert Ashley / State of the Art / Critical Language for Video
17+	Geraldine Pilgrim	Hesitate & Demonstrate / Irish Performance / Women & Jazz	47	Alastair MacLennan	Steve Willats / Performance Art in Education / TSWA 3D / Art on TV
18	Robyn Archer	John Cage & Laurie Anderson / IOU Theatre / Independent Video	48	Lily Savage / Ethyl Eichelberger	Who watches performance? / David Freeman / Internationalism
19+	Cathy Berberian	Neo-Naturism / New Image / New York Live / Nuovo Spettacolorita	49	Elizabeth Jappe	Documenta 87 / Robert Wilson & Heiner Muller / Egidio Alvaro / Berlin Performance
20/21+	Psychic TV	Anne Bean / Philip Glass & Rhys Chatham / Rational Theatre / New York Video	50/51+	J.G. Ballard	Harold Budd / Cage & Cunningham / Akademia Ruchu / Sounds of Sheffield / Edinburgh
22	—	Impact Theatre / Bloodgroup / Video Afterimage / Basement Group	52#	John Wyver	Steven Taylor Woodrow / Pirate TV / TV & Community / High Tech vs Minimalism
23	Nan Hoover	Zap Club / Hermine / Paperpool / Sheffield Expanded Media	53#	Marina Abramovic & Ulay	Tina Keane / Images of Men / Performance & Sculpture / Performance Documentation
24+	Kazuko Hohki (Frank Chickens)	John Maybury / Urban Sax / New York Performance / Charlie Hooker	54#	John Fox	Kantor in Rehearsal / Radical Art in Scotland, Process & Product
25	Joseph Beuys / Jan Fabre	Notting Hill Carnival / Marty St James & Anne Wilson / Music Supplement	55*	EDGE 88 Special	Articles by Dan Cameron / Sylvia Eiblmayr / Steven Durland / Gray Watson
26	Lindsay Kemp	Burnt Wreckage, Sculpture / Lumiere & Son / Performance Journeys			
27	Silvia Ziranek	Philip Glass / Fashion / Camp Art / Ddart / John Stalin			
28	Derek Jarman	Kenneth Anger / African Magic / Performance Artists from Outer Space / Carnival			

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FORGET**

Safer Sex

GREENPEACE

NUCLEAR POWER

The possibility of future nuclear accidents is real. The probability is high. A core meltdown accident possibly resulting in Chernobyl scale releases of radiation can be expected within 20 years according to former US Nuclear Regulatory Commissioner Asselstine.

Greenpeace has raised fundamental questions on the safety of UK gas-cooled reactors and is campaigning for their closure.

THANK GOD SOMEONE'S MAKING WAVES

GREENPEACE

THE GREAT WHALES

Since commercial whaling was banned in 1986, 11,000 whales have been slaughtered, many for so-called scientific research. Iceland was the first whaling nation to side-step the commercial whaling ban. To make Iceland pay dearly for the whales she kills, Greenpeace is promoting a boycott of Icelandic fish. Meanwhile Greenpeace will work for a permanent ban on commercial whaling.

THANK GOD SOMEONE'S MAKING WAVES

GREENPEACE

NON-VIOLENCE

In 17 years of campaigning, Greenpeace's greatest achievement has been its refusal to resort to violence. Ever. At least as important as opposing nuclear weapons, saving whales or trying to stop ocean pollution, is the way it has been done.

To Greenpeace, the peace is as important as the green; the means is as important as the end.

THANK GOD SOMEONE'S MAKING WAVES

GREENPEACE

NUCLEAR FREE SEAS

A nuclear war is most likely to break out at sea. Naval nuclear arms have proliferated unchecked, while land based weapons have been the focus of arms negotiations.

To head off the naval nuclear arms race and alert the world to the dangerous war-fighting strategies adopted by the nuclear navies Greenpeace is promoting its Nuclear Free Seas campaign.

THANK GOD SOMEONE'S MAKING WAVES

GREENPEACE

DYING SEALS

Seals are dying in the Wash; on the eastern shores of the North Sea, up to 10,000 have already been lost. In order to save as many seals as possible, Greenpeace is acting with other groups to set up an emergency centre in East Anglia.

Scientists have confirmed that pollution is contributing to the seals' deaths, so Greenpeace is also intervening to block chemical waste pipelines which discharge into the marine environment.

The aim is to oblige governments to drastically cut the amounts of pollution they allow to enter the North Sea.

THANK GOD SOMEONE'S MAKING WAVES

GREENPEACE

ACID RAIN

Acid rain causes death and damage to forests, lakes, wildlife, crops, buildings and ourselves. Now scientists have calculated the reductions in acid-forming pollutants that must be made.

They are: 90% cuts in sulphur dioxide
75% cuts in nitrogen oxides
75% cuts in atmospheric ozone.

These are the cuts nature demands if it is to survive. They are the only cuts which Greenpeace will accept.

THANK GOD SOMEONE'S MAKING WAVES

**THANK GOD SOMEONE'S
MAKING WAVES
GREENPEACE**

GREENPEACE URGENTLY NEEDS YOUR SUPPORT.

Please send a personal donation of £12 or a family donation of £17.50. Or more. In return you will receive our quarterly newsletter and campaign updates. Remember, the more you can afford to send us, the more we can do to protect the natural world.

Please accept my donation of: £12 Single £17.50 Family Additional donation £_____

I enclose cheque/P.O. for £_____ payable to Greenpeace Ltd.

Please charge my Visa/Access a/c no: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name: Mr/Mrs/Ms _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Please return to: Greenpeace, FREEPOST, 30-31 Islington Green, London N1 8BB.