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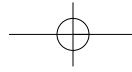
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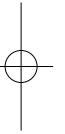
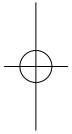
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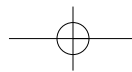
NOTES *on a return*



NOTES *on a return*



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NOTES on an (Impossible/Eternal) return: A Foreword

Amelia Jones



I am honoured to write a brief note at the beginning of this publication relating to *NOTES on a return*. I did not attend any of the 2009 performances or events, rethinking, reworking, or responding to the 1980s performances at the Laing, nor did I attend any of the original events in the 1980s. However, thanks to curator Sophia Hao, I have been involved in aspects of their afterlife, nosing around in photographs, archives, texts, and other modes in which they linger in history now, after all of the reconsiderations have come and gone.

Most notably, I participate (tangentially) in this publication. Part of which I am writing ‘right now’, at 3:30 pm on Friday 16 October, 2009, at my desk, in my house in Manchester. But this catalogue too will be ‘over’, a relic, a thing frozen in time, in your hands as you peruse it at some point in the future. And yet, it will be reactivated through your very perusal. To this end, here are some brief thoughts on the impossibility of returning (and yet our eternal desire to do so).

As Jacques Derrida noted in exploring why we write and read philosophy (or why we make and view art), we are aiming our works and writings to future readers/viewers; when the philosopher ‘writes himself to himself, he *writes himself to the other* who is infinitely far away and who is supposed to send his signature back to him. He has no relation to himself that is not forced to defer itself by passing through the other in the form, precisely, of the *eternal return*.¹



NOTES on a return finds its place within a plethora of events, art works, performances, exhibitions, and scholarship that has emerged in the past decade addressing the issue of live art in history². Something is in the air – an interest in, even obsession with, the passing of time. This obsession



has been played out in various ways, from Jeremy Deller re-enacting the 1984 British miners' strike in his 2001 *Battle of Orgreave* – a piece now known through textual descriptions (including scholarly analysis), through the installations of documentary 'traces' from the original strike and the re-enactment and from the 2001 BBC film of the project directed by Mike Figgis; the exhibitions *Experience, Memory, Reenactment* at the Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam (2004) and *Not Quite How I Remember It* at the Powerplant in Toronto (2008); to the forthcoming UK publications *Archaeologies of Presence* (edited by Nick Kaye, Gabriella Giannachi, and Michael Shanks) and *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (edited by myself and Adrian Heathfield). In all of these (and dozens more) projects, time is of the essence.

Some of these effusions of/on the ephemeral seem to seek to confirm rather than interrogate a belief in the 'presence' or 'authenticity' of the live body (the body that we apprehend before us in our 'present' time and space). Thus, in Marina Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, she re-enacted six major performance pieces from the 1970s – describing the work as an attempt to reclaim the authentic meaning of the originals – and performed a single new work (the seventh 'easy piece')³. Abramović's project, notably, focuses on retrieving the truth of the original works (including one of her own 1970s performances, *Lips of Thomas*). But *Seven Easy Pieces*, while one of the most important performance events of the past decade in that it raises these questions starkly, fails to address in a critical way (or even to acknowledge) what I am identifying here as the 'eternal return', the desire to return to the 'truth' that motivates all art and performance making.⁴

Seven Easy Pieces unwittingly confirms the impossibility of retrieving the truth of the past precisely through its belabored attempts to do so. This failure – which is a highly productive and even creative one – is revealed in part in the project's anxious embrace of a range of documentary processes both to retrieve the 'originals' and to secure a place for the restaged versions in history. Thus, the re-enactments are documented by a film by Babette Mangolte with carefully filmed and edited footage from each re-enactment and a large catalogue with extensive photographic and

textual documentation. The reiterative, even over-stated nature of the documentation confirms not the true meaning and value of the work as authentically recreating the past but the very reliance of *Seven Easy Pieces* on the economy of repetition by which all utterances come to share meaning now and historically as we attempt to recreate them in the future. Redoing Joseph Beuys' 1965 performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2005 does not confirm the truth of either Abramović's performing body or that of Beuys. The paradox is that such a redoing produces a new body that itself is always already 'gone'; it only means as much as it does by reference to the past that it reiterates but at the same time reframes (if you perform a 'google image' search on 'Beuys hare' chances are you will retrieve primarily images of Abramović redoing the piece, not of Beuys – such is the case as I write this in 2009, at any rate).

Abramović aside, most of the recent projects exploring the difficulties of understanding live art or live events begin from an acknowledgment of the impossibility of pinning down time – or the bodies, experiences, processes, and materializations that take place in its embrace. (Thus, for example, Deller's piece noted above explicitly combines past and re-enacted elements, deliberately restaging a historical event to make us rethink how we relate to the past.) These recent projects such as Deller's also highlight rather than disavowing the driving *desire* to make sense of ourselves in the present – this desire that motivates our interest in past art and performance. Sophia Hao's *NOTES on a return* seems to me to be one of the most sensitive among these more critical projects exploring and examining our desire for the truth precisely by *accepting* this desire (an essential step in understanding how to look at it more critically) and then *questioning* its bases and its modes of expression.

Hao's multi-pronged curatorial strategy produces its own creative moment in time and space. Through installations, commissioned new works (which are now in the past), and solicited lectures, Hao prompts and encourages a range of innovative responses to the problem of how to remember past performances, how to write them (or interrogate past writings of them) into history. To take some examples of her wide-ranging



strategy: 1) piles of reproduced documents (and not just photographs, but letters and other ephemera) from the 1980s works were offered to the visitor to take away in each of the new installations; 2) while Mona Hatoum declined to do an interview with Hao about her 1980s piece for the project (because of her feeling that the piece had been compromised) Mike Collier, who had been curator at the Laing at the time, sent an email to Hao describing his recollections of the piece, which was then included as part of the 2009 installation recalling the event; 3) rather than assigning the 1980s works to be ‘redone’ in any direct way, Hao commissioned younger artists to rethink the earlier works – to respond to them, rather than attempting to remake them.

This latter curatorial strategy led to the creation of new works playing off of particular aspects of the 1980s works – in some cases complex aspects including the planning, execution, *and* reception of the earlier piece. Thus, Graham Hudson, charged with responding to Hatoum’s 1986 performance installation, highlighted her struggle to perform nude (which failed, as she was forced to wear a body stocking) by proposing a series of ‘limit’ pieces to test what institutional structures, particularly the ‘Health and Safety’ standards restricting such events at UK public venues, can accommodate. The final ‘art work’ consisted in part of an archival folder containing printouts of the email correspondence in relation to these proposals.

NOTES on a return addresses our desire to ‘re-find’ the past in order to secure our coherence in the present by, as Derrida suggests, passing through the ‘other’ (particularly starkly visible in discourses around performance art histories). Through such complex and subtle strategies, it seems to me that *NOTES on a return* brilliantly performs the past, in ways that are themselves temporally (1980s/2009) and spatially specific (after all, the events were at the Laing and return to being events at the Laing) yet open to future readings. In this way, the project *does* what it seeks to *explore*, activating its own participation (as institutional discourse) in establishing what it critiques.

.....

We engage with art or performance because we want confirmation of (our own) present/presence, paradoxically by relating to works produced by another in the past. We want to defer endlessly the ‘eternal return’, the way in which we are continually opened to the other, even as we want fullness within our own enunciation of self. We seek this in performance art by clinging to a notion of the ‘original event’. But, as Hao’s project insists (generously, and not confrontationally), there is no original event; or, strictly speaking, there ‘was’ an event, but it was never – as Collier’s admittedly partial memory of Hatoum’s performance indicates – fully ‘present’ (if presence means coextensivity in a specific space and time in a way that can be known fully and completely through a perceiving body).

As Derrida puts it, ‘when I listen to another, his lived experience is not present to me “in person”, in the original.’⁵ And yet, I maintain, the reason we engage with things called art (whether ‘live’ or not) is that we imagine a relation to the other to be opened up by this engagement – which thus brings us out of ourselves, out of the death of being only ever caught in our own inside. The paradox is that we open ourselves outward in this way only to suffer our own incoherence and inevitable mortality, throwing us back on models of meaning and value that might support, again, our belief in our fullness. We are dying either way. The eternal return involves the bouncing back and forth between our desire to be unique and full within

ourselves, and our fundamental (if disavowed via mystifications such as *Seven Easy Pieces*) reliance on repetition and otherness in order to establish who we are.

I am apprehending *NOTES on a return* via a range of documents (including Hao's own texts, and those of artists and participants in the symposium) available on my laptop, a good 150 miles away from the Laing, and at an always increasing temporal remove from the events. Siphoning this information through my own memories, intellectual frameworks and belief systems, as far as I can tell this project brilliantly foregrounds the way in which our desire to know who we 'are' at any moment is forever plagued by failure and loss. *NOTES on a return* never 'returns' us to the past; nor, thank heavens, does it propose to. It accepts the impossibility of that fantasy of a return and, rather, engages in multiple ways with past expressions (works of art/performances in this case) so as to reinvigorate the never-ending process of making sense of the temporality that is always rolling away out of our grasp.



¹ See Jacques Derrida, 'Roundtable on Autobiography', tr. Peggy Kamuf, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie McDonald (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982/1985), p. 88; my italics. Derrida is thinking specifically of Nietzsche's work here, but in the broader context of philosophy writing (and, it is my claim that this is equally relevant for art-making) in general.

² For a full-ish list of these, please see my timeline in the book I am co-editing with Adrian Heathfield, which will comprise another contribution to this surge of interest, entitled *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (New York and London: Routledge, forthcoming).

³ In the catalogue for the exhibition, Abramović notes that 'the only real way to document a performance art piece,' presumably to ensure its place in this history in its truthful form as she claims is her goal, 'is to re-perform the piece itself.' Abramović, 'Reenactment', *Seven Easy Pieces* (Milan: Charta, 2007), p. 11. I discuss these claims in greater detail in my essay 'Performing Memory: Artistic Reenactments and the Impossibility of Authenticity', in *Archaeologies of Presence: Acting, Performing, Being*, ed. Nick Kaye, Gabriella Giannachi, and Michael Shanks (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁴ The project also mystifies the meaning and value of present and past performances and in so doing disavows its participation in the art market's strategies for freezing ephemeral art to market it through exhibitions, publications, and (eventually) the sale of documents.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, tr. David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 38.

I Had Made NOTES

Notes on NOTES: Writers in Residence (detail)
Matthew Hearn

Introduction

Sophia Y. Hao



I want to begin with a little ceremony in which I participated myself. An obscure event probably, which took place on a piece of waste ground near the centre of the city of Rotterdam one cold and foggy morning in 1992. We brought with us a bag of dark earth and a small rectangular enclosure, or frame, made of wood, 80 x 80 x 10 centimetres. We poured our earth within the frame until it was filled, removed the frame so the square of earth remained on the earth, and left.

What we were doing was re-enacting a work of the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica which he first carried out in 1978, shortly before his death in 1980 at the age of 43. He enacted the ceremony in Rio de Janeiro, in Cajú, a forlorn piece urban wasteland near the port. He called it *Counter-Bolide: returning earth to earth*.

This needs to be explained. In the mid-60s Oiticica created what he called his *Bolides*. These were containers – glass or wood or plastic – containing earth or pigment and were an expression of the nucleic concept of form that he was developing at the time (*Bolide* means ‘meteor’, or ‘fireball’, in Portuguese). This involved a radicalisation of traditional genres. His own account goes as follows: ‘The *Glass Bolide* (and the *Box Bolide* too: the pigment colour applied or boxed in, was a way of turning effective the pigment mass in a new form extra-painting) which contained pigment, earth, etc., did not act as a mere “container for the earth” but made manifest the presence of some earth as a piece of the earth: it gave it a first and contained concretion removing it from a naturalistic dispersed stage.’¹

By 1978, Oiticica felt that, given our commodity culture, the *Bolide*, with the passage of time, had begun to lose its efficacy as an act made in the living world and had taken on the inert, fixed quality of an object absorbed by the institution of art. Therefore the contradiction of the contradiction was to return earth removed from earth back to earth to re-animate the continuity. In contrast to many works of Oiticica – his

Penetrables, or *Parangolé Capes* – which drew people in to participate, the *Counter-Bolide* was a sort of internal act of critical negation and affirmation within the logic of his own work to renew its relationship to the world at large. The material object was the minimum necessary to register it as a conceptual act. As the square of earth lay there, it gradually lost its ‘concretion’ signified in the form of the rectangle, part of human culture, and was absorbed back into the universal flux. The old *Bolide* was buried and a new one arose. The metaphor of renewal was amplified by the *Bolide* implicitly leaving the highly valued art gallery and museum and going back fruitfully to the earth in its most abandoned and least valued appearance.

That is what we were doing, in a neglected corner of Rotterdam, just a few metres from the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art where a large, posthumous retrospective of Oiticica’s work was about to open. He himself had said that the *Counter-Bolide* could be repeated anywhere and by anyone ‘when the proper occasion or necessity for it appears’.² Therefore it seemed absolutely correct to re-enact it in each city in which the exhibition was held – Rotterdam, Paris, Barcelona, Lisbon and Minneapolis. This fact was imparted to the visitor by colour photographs hanging in the exhibition.

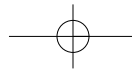
While the idea of renewing the vitality of a work of art appealed to me strongly, my feelings about the actual photographs were curiously ambivalent. The present moment (1992, that is), and the locations in different countries, are made very vivid. But in most cases it is obvious that the sites chosen are close to the museum and that the people carrying out the *Counter-Bolide* are museum staff. Are we assisting at a lugubrious burial in which something has died in the confines of the museum and is being laid to rest with institutional trappings? Or are we witnessing a renewal, in the very shadow of the museum, of Oiticica’s view of art as a poetics of life? The *Counter-Bolide* was always either, or both, a burial and a resurrection. And Oiticica himself recommended an attitude of ‘critical ambivalence’ (his phrase) in order to avoid being trapped in absolute and universal categories and values.

I think these ambivalent impressions remind one of what is actually

involved in a genuine re-creation or renewal. Many such ceremonies of renewal in human cultures through history have a strong element of risk and trepidation accompanying them. This is the case, for example, with the archaic Aztec Fire Ceremony. This is one version of a very widespread ritual involving the crucial human achievement of producing fire at will. In Aztec society, every cycle of 52 years was marked by the New Fire Ceremony; a time of great nervousness in which all fires were extinguished and replaced with a new fire ceremonially kindled using a fire-drill and board. One marvels at the Aztec conviction that it is necessary periodically to go right back to the beginning, to return to the time before the innovation was made, with all the anxieties involved in not knowing whether, this time around, the procedure would work.

In fact it is fascinating to consider further this little prefix ‘re-’, as in ‘return’, the keyword of this conference, which is so commonplace and familiar. It seems, when one comes to think about it, that its use can be divided between a group of words which are more or less neutral and those that have a powerful charge of vitality. On one side we have return, repeat, record, report, relate, represent, and so on, and on the other side words like renew, re-create, regenerate, revitalise, reactivate, revivify, re-animate, replenish, refresh, etc. The words on one side challenge those on the other: there is always the question of whether a repetition is a renewal or just an empty, arid copy, and this bears on the efficacy of any recurring ceremony, such as those of the New Fire or the New Year. I would like to give an account of three recent, and I think brilliant, examples of the revitalisation of a form which is very ancient and always returning: the procession. Of these three, two have been carried out and one still remains a project (this is not a problem since I have always considered that unrealised projects in contemporary art can be as meaningful as those that circumstances have allowed to happen).

I wasn’t present, unfortunately, at Jeremy Deller’s *Procession* organised for the Manchester International Festival with the assistance of Sarah Perks and others, which took place on Sunday, July 5, 2009. But I was captivated by a large photograph published the next day in, a birds’ eye view of the defile snaking its way through the streets of central Manchester. The core



of Deller's light-hearted concept was to borrow a traditional popular form – to de-officialise it – to include representatives of contemporary cultures which would have never normally been given that approval. The result was that joyful sense of mental freedom when rigid thought-patterns are surpassed. The Guardian's chief arts writer, Charlotte Higgins, reported: 'Deller likes the idea that there are people who, according to conventional wisdom, ought not to be celebrated – which is why, wandering gloomily into view, come the emos and Goths who hang out in Cathedral Gardens on a Saturday afternoon. Before and behind them putter local authority mobile libraries.' She goes on: 'Look, there's Britannia, and after her, a banner celebrating Ian Tomlinson, who died during the G20 protests. Ed Hall, who often collaborates with Deller, has stitched beautiful banners, including one designed by David Hockney, depicting an ashtray, for a chain-puffing group, the Unrepentant Smokers. There's a Smoking Kills banner just behind, for balance.'³

Obviously there is a strong sense of carnival here, reminders of the Notting Hill Carnival procession in England, and beyond that the carnivals of a country like Brazil, which Hélio Oiticica, to re-invoke him, called 'the greatest public improvisation in the world'⁴. He was speaking of carnival before it began to rigidify and over-organise itself into a TV spectacular, which is the case of the Rio Carnival, impressive though that still remains. 'Improvisation' and 'public' are the key words Oiticica uses, and these are a characteristic of carnival which can be strongly felt in a book of photographs taken by Claudio Edinger of carnivals in several Brazilian cities. In his preface to the book the Brazilian anthropologist Roberto Damatta writes eloquently of:

the thousands of microscopic carnival dramas, these tiny plays of the people in which every citizen has the right to act and participate, once he or she is duly garbed in fancy-dress and steps into the streets revealing what they may have liked to have been, or could have been ... this *fantasia* ... the equality and liberty of the individual in a profoundly controlled, authoritarian and hierarchical society.⁵

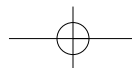
Mikhail Bakhtin, the great Russian theorist of carnival, carnival being,

as we know, a universal release-valve of human society, has given this description: 'During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.'⁶

The Guardian report of the Manchester procession continues: 'Suddenly, there are nodding black plumes as a horse-drawn hearse appears – inside the glass-sided carriage, the word HACIENDA picked out in cream chrysanthemums. It's the first of a fleet of hearses, each bringing a floral tribute to another lost, loved club of the north-west: Wigan Casino; Bolton's Burden Park. This last gets the local vote: "Very poignant", says Rachel Cook, 36.'

I will now speak, with slightly more gravity, of another city, another appearance of horses, another funeral cortège, and another reversal of the official and established order. This is Rose English's project, *Beauty and Beau: a Requiem for the Horse who Knows History*. In the context of Rose English's own work, this is just one manifestation of an extraordinary, life-long interest in the great global tribe of equine beings, its past, its present, its breeds and its individuals. One work, *My Mathematics*, centres round a dialogue between her and a horse on stage. In her procession, which still remains a project, here is what we would witness, taken from her own project description:

Beauty and Beau will be the funeral of an actual horse. The cortège will be a choir of mourners accompanied by musicians and the ceremonial presence of two black Fresian funeral horses, Beauty and Beau, will be used to honour a dead horse with the epithet 'the horse who knows history'. In an eloquent reversal of the usual practice *Beauty and Beau* will honour the remains of one of their own species. Like a vestige counterpoint of the symbolic ceremonials and traditions of the military (eg., the grave of the 'unknown soldier') the presence of the horse who knows history will evoke



The 'Re-' factor

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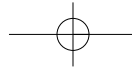
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involved in a genuine re-creation or renewal. Many such ceremonies of renewal in human cultures through history have a strong element of risk and trepidation accompanying them. This is the case, for example, with the archaic Aztec Fire Ceremony. This is one version of a very widespread ritual involving the crucial human achievement of producing fire at will. In Aztec society, every cycle of 52 years was marked by the New Fire Ceremony; a time of great nervousness in which all fires were extinguished and replaced with a new fire ceremonially kindled using a fire-drill and board. One marvels at the Aztec conviction that it is necessary periodically to go right back to the beginning, to return to the time before the innovation was made, with all the anxieties involved in not knowing whether, this time around, the procedure would work.

In fact it is fascinating to consider further this little prefix ‘re-’, as in ‘return’, the keyword of this conference, which is so commonplace and familiar. It seems, when one comes to think about it, that its use can be divided between a group of words which are more or less neutral and those that have a powerful charge of vitality. On one side we have return, repeat, record, report, relate, represent, and so on, and on the other side words like renew, re-create, regenerate, revitalise, reactivate, revivify, re-animate, replenish, refresh, etc. The words on one side challenge those on the other: there is always the question of whether a repetition is a renewal or just an empty, arid copy, and this bears on the efficacy of any recurring ceremony, such as those of the New Fire or the New Year. I would like to give an account of three recent, and I think brilliant, examples of the revitalisation of a form which is very ancient and always returning: the procession. Of these three, two have been carried out and one still remains a project (this is not a problem since I have always considered that unrealised projects in contemporary art can be as meaningful as those that circumstances have allowed to happen).

I wasn’t present, unfortunately, at Jeremy Deller’s *Procession* organised for the Manchester International Festival with the assistance of Sarah Perks and others, which took place on Sunday, July 5, 2009. But I was captivated by a large photograph published the next day in, a birds’ eye view of the defile snaking its way through the streets of central Manchester. The core



of Deller's light-hearted concept was to borrow a traditional popular form – to de-officialise it – to include representatives of contemporary cultures which would have never normally been given that approval. The result was that joyful sense of mental freedom when rigid thought-patterns are surpassed. The Guardian's chief arts writer, Charlotte Higgins, reported: 'Deller likes the idea that there are people who, according to conventional wisdom, ought not to be celebrated – which is why, wandering gloomily into view, come the emos and Goths who hang out in Cathedral Gardens on a Saturday afternoon. Before and behind them putter local authority mobile libraries.' She goes on: 'Look, there's Britannia, and after her, a banner celebrating Ian Tomlinson, who died during the G20 protests. Ed Hall, who often collaborates with Deller, has stitched beautiful banners, including one designed by David Hockney, depicting an ashtray, for a chain-puffing group, the Unrepentant Smokers. There's a Smoking Kills banner just behind, for balance.'³

Obviously there is a strong sense of carnival here, reminders of the Notting Hill Carnival procession in England, and beyond that the carnivals of a country like Brazil, which Hélio Oiticica, to re-invoke him, called 'the greatest public improvisation in the world'⁴. He was speaking of carnival before it began to rigidify and over-organise itself into a TV spectacular, which is the case of the Rio Carnival, impressive though that still remains. 'Improvisation' and 'public' are the key words Oiticica uses, and these are a characteristic of carnival which can be strongly felt in a book of photographs taken by Claudio Edinger of carnivals in several Brazilian cities. In his preface to the book the Brazilian anthropologist Roberto Damatta writes eloquently of:

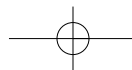
the thousands of microscopic carnival dramas, these tiny plays of the people in which every citizen has the right to act and participate, once he or she is duly garbed in fancy-dress and steps into the streets revealing what they may have liked to have been, or could have been ... this *fantasia* ... the equality and liberty of the individual in a profoundly controlled, authoritarian and hierarchical society.⁵

Mikhail Bakhtin, the great Russian theorist of carnival, carnival being, as we know, a universal release-valve of human society, has given this description: 'During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.'⁶

The Guardian report of the Manchester procession continues: 'Suddenly, there are nodding black plumes as a horse-drawn hearse appears – inside the glass-sided carriage, the word HACIENDA picked out in cream chrysanthemums. It's the first of a fleet of hearses, each bringing a floral tribute to another lost, loved club of the north-west: Wigan Casino; Bolton's Burden Park. This last gets the local vote: "Very poignant", says Rachel Cook, 36.'

I will now speak, with slightly more gravity, of another city, another appearance of horses, another funeral cortège, and another reversal of the official and established order. This is Rose English's project, *Beauty and Beau: a Requiem for the Horse who Knows History*. In the context of Rose English's own work, this is just one manifestation of an extraordinary, life-long interest in the great global tribe of equine beings, its past, its present, its breeds and its individuals. One work, *My Mathematics*, centres round a dialogue between her and a horse on stage. In her procession, which still remains a project, here is what we would witness, taken from her own project description:

Beauty and Beau will be the funeral of an actual horse. The cortège will be a choir of mourners accompanied by musicians and the ceremonial presence of two black Fresian funeral horses, Beauty and Beau, will be used to honour a dead horse with the epithet 'the horse who knows history'. In an eloquent reversal of the usual practice *Beauty and Beau* will honour the remains of one of their own species. Like a vestige counterpoint of the symbolic ceremonials and traditions of the military (eg., the grave of the 'unknown soldier') the presence of the horse who knows



history will evoke a sense of what has been forgotten but awaits remembrance by the fluid substance we call history.

Solemn, mysterious, powerful and evocative, *Beauty and Beau* will be presented as a torch-lit progress with 'stations' through the streets of central London at dusk. Stopping at strategic points for particular songs written for that location and that moment, the cortège will follow a route featuring many equestrian statues and monuments. The proposed route will be from Jubilee Gardens, past the old site of Astley's Amphitheatre (the first circus, founded by equestrian and ex-cavalry officer Philip Astley), over Westminster Bridge, past the statue of Boadicea in her chariot (Boadicea is believed to be buried under St Pancras Station), round Parliament Square, up Whitehall, past the cenotaph, past Horse Guards to Trafalgar Square with the statue of Wellington on his horse Copenhagen. Pausing also at the empty plinth (the absent monument) in Trafalgar Square the cortège will travel up Regents Street to Portland Place (with other equestrian monuments) through Regents Park and on to Primrose Hill for the symbolic interment of the horse.⁷

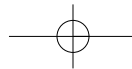
Now, the third recent return of the procession I want to mention took place in 2005 at Tijuana, by the sea, on the frontier between Mexico and the United States, a border which Mexicans frequently risk their lives to cross in order to find jobs in the USA. This was the project of a young Venezuelan artist, Javier Téllez, who also has a recurrent theme in his work. The son of a psychiatrist father and a psychiatrist mother, he grew up in close contact with the mentally ill. His subsequent work as an artist has revolved round collaborations with the inmates of asylums, in various countries, in specific works that answer to the local context. As part of *One flew over the void*, as the Tijuana event was called, inmates of the Baja California Mental Health Center in Mexicali formed a parade, part circus, part carnival, part political demonstration, drawing a parallel between the geopolitical border and the demarcation confining them to the mental institution. As the noisy procession arrived at the border area, a human cannonball was about to be shot in a high arc across the frontier (certainly

a novel form of immigration! One can imagine the police exhaustively checking his papers before allowing him inside his canon). However, while the large crowd that had gathered to witness the spectacle – local people, art world types, media crews, police and immigration officials – stared into the sky expectantly, a Mexican worker took the opportunity to slip through the fence and cross undetected to the US.

Coming back again now to this two-faced 're-' prefix – as in record, return, revive, revitalise, and so on – we can see Anne Bean's extraordinary Matt's Gallery publication, *Autobiuary: Shadow Deeds*, produced in 2006 by the artist, with the designer Phil Baines, and with the support of Matt's Gallery director Robin Klassnik, as a heroic struggle with the implications of this lexicon of re-words. It is reflected in the layout itself – a sober little breviary of interpretive essays surrounded by a wild profusion of images of Anne Bean's bodily interferences in established patterns and conventional assumptions: a little breviary with perforated edges so that, when pressed out, it can be read in conjunction with several pages of overlaid images simultaneously. To rescue, re-stage, and record actions from a particularly rich period of the artist's ideas between 1969 and 1974, without making them into a funerary monument: that was the task of the event *Autobiuary*. How – and I quote her own words – to provide information when 'photographs seemed as questionable as memory, and truth danced to its own tune.'⁸



Her procedure really was to continue to experiment with what had originally been an experiment, and experimentally, at least once, to dispense with documentation altogether. This work, *Yearning*, as it was revealingly called, went as follows: At the beginning of one year, at the Scout Hut, Jamaica Road, Bermondsey in London, she did a performance in front of an audience of five women, of which no records were made.



On the same night, in the same place, a year later, she asked each of them to re-perform the piece according to their memories of it. They did so in turn, without seeing each other's versions. Then the piece was re-made as a public performance which Anne herself took part in and performed her own memory of the original. Not only were all their memories of what happened very individual and different – as was to be expected – but sometimes the five witnesses remembered things the artist had done that even she had forgotten, or given little importance to ...

The conclusion drawn from this event can only be as open as possible: that there is no remembering without forgetting, that there is no single truth, and that we need the *other*.

Apart from the word 'return', I calculate there are 33 different 're-' words in the text I have just read. Here they are, in no particular order:

remove, re-enact, reanimate, renew, relate, register, retrospective, repeat, resurrect, recommend, remind, recreate, replace, record, report, represent, revive, regenerate, revitalise, reactivate, revivify, replenish, refresh, recur, remain, realise, reveal, release, reverse, remember, revolve, reflect, rescue

I leave you to draw the line where such words begin to be infused with that extra charge which connects them with the myth of return and renewal.



¹ Hélio Oiticica, "Account on TO RETURN EARTH TO THE EARTH in the first URBAN-POETIC EVENT: KLEEMANIA at CAJU/Rio de Janeiro, dec. 18th, 1979", Hélio Oiticica, Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1992, p. 202.

² Ibid.

³ Charlotte Higgins, "First came the scouts' band – then Goths, smokers and a lament for lost clubs", The Guardian, London, Monday, July 6, 2009, p. 9.

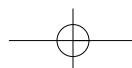
⁴ Hélio Oiticica, op. cit., p. 228.

⁵ Roberto Damatta, in Claudio Edinger, Carnaval, São Paulo: Dórea Books and Art, 1996. UK Edition, Dewi Lewis Publishing, 1996.

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and his world, trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 7.

⁷ Rose English, Beauty and Beau project notes (unpublished). Quoted with the artist's kind permission.

⁸ Anne Bean, Autobiography, London: Matts Gallery, 2006, p. 3.



Towards a Short History of Performance

Andrea Tarisa



At the turn of the millennium a number of publications and exhibitions provided a critical and curatorial re-appraisal of performance practices in the 1960s and 70s. The context for these was manifold: a broader re-appraisal of conceptual and experimental art from the period; the re-emergence of its legacies and processes in the work of younger generations of artists; the return of participatory and situational practices that foregrounded events, activities and audience participation; the extension of notions of the performative beyond the confines of performance; an interest in the archive as generative space of ideas rather than as art history. MoCA Los Angeles' 1998 exhibition *Out of Actions* was one such project. Including the work of artists such as Lucio Fontana, Georges Matthieu or Jackson Pollock alongside documents and testaments of works more typically associated with performance art, it sought to reflect - as its curator, Paul Schimmel observed - 'a reversal in the traditional precedence of the object over the act, foregrounding the process of creation over that of production'¹. A few years later, in 2001, Jens Hoffmann curated the musically sounding *A Little Bit of History Repeated*, at Kunstwerke in Berlin. Here, Hoffmann invited contemporary artists such as John Bock, Tania Bruguera, Trisha Donnelly and Elmgreen & Dragset among others, to creatively revisit performances from the 1960s and 70s, using them as a starting point to create new work. Both these projects explicitly looked back from the vantage point of the present to address some of the curatorial issues that performance art proposes: it is no surprise that as a Museum, MOCA focused on an expanded field of material culture, shifting the emphasis towards generative acts; while Kunstwerke, a temporary exhibition space dedicated to emerging practices, was informed instead by contemporary artists who find in the temporal gap between past and present a fertile ground for the creation of new work.

It is against this backdrop that I co-curated with Iwona Blazwick a series of events held at the Whitechapel Gallery under the title of *A Short History of Performance*. Between 2002 and 2006 we held four seasons of events

that sought to engage with performance practices through a historical lens, and that in different ways attempted to reflect on some of the issues raised when considering the event-based and the ephemeral in exhibition. For the first season, held in 2002, we invited seven artists to re-enact performances that they had first held in the 1960s and 70s. They were The Bernsteins, Stuart Brisley, The Kipper Kids, Jannis Kounellis, Bruce McLean, Herman Nitsch and Carolee Schneemann. The proposition was a simple one: if the primary locus of performance art at the time was the live body and the form of engagement defined through direct experience, then what would happen if we once again witnessed performances, live? *A Short History of Performance Part II*, held in 2003, moved away from a consideration of historical performances and focused instead on a specific performance strategy that has been adopted by artists across generations: the use of the lecture as a work of art. It included the work of Joseph Beuys, Robert Morris and Martha Rosler; artists associated with institutional critique who had emerged in the 1980s, such as Mark Dion and Andrea Fraser; and a younger generation that included Inventory, Walid Ra'ad and Carey Young. As such, the season was less concerned with the issues arising from the presentation of historic performances in exhibition, than with establishing a genealogy of practices, a genre if you like.

A pioneer among performance artists, Allan Kaprow was the subject of *A Short History of Performance Part III* in 2005, which brought together a series of Scores - produced between 1973 and 1979 - which the artist intended as instructions to be 'activated' by anyone at any time. Presented as pared down, instructional video scores and activity booklets, they were formulated as precursors to action rather than its residue or relic; as tools to action rather than its evidence. The notion of a score re-merged in different guise in *A Short History of Performance Part IV* in 2006, which took as its starting point an exploration of re-enactment in film, considered through the work of Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Judith Barry, James Coleman, Rebecca Horn, Christian Jankowski, Isaac Julien, Aernout Mik, Catherine Sullivan, Francesco Vezzoli, Gillian Wearing, Artur Zmijewski and the collective Anna Sanders Films.

As a whole, the works presented ushered in a wide range of questions

and issues that are too numerous to reflect on in the space afforded here. Instead, I would like to focus on the question of ‘returns’ that this publication addresses by focusing on two works from the first and last series of *A Short History of Performance*, in particular through the lens of notions of re-staging and re-enactment.



In our consideration of artists to include in *A Short History of Performance Part I*, we sought to reflect a variety of approaches to performance that had characterised the 1960s and 70s, from Schneemann’s Kinetic Theatre and Nitsch’s theatricalised ritual to the often absurdist collaborative practices of The Bernsteins and the Kipper Kids; from the simple, contained gestures that made up the work of Brisley and McLean to Kounellis’ untitled installation of 1969, which simply presented for a day 12 live horses in the space of the gallery. We had invited other artists as well: when we asked Vito Acconci whether he could be tempted to restage *Seedbed* (1971), he politely and somewhat wistfully declined on account of his age. We also invited Gilbert & George to re-stage *Underneath the Arches* (1969), making much of the fact that other artists had already agreed, including Kounellis with his installation. “Dear Iwona, Dear Andrea”, they wrote in reply, “wild horses wouldn’t persuade us”. And that was that. It was also important that better known performances such as Schneemann’s *Meat Joy* (1964) and Nitsch’s Orgies-Mysteries Theatre should feature alongside lesser known works by Brisley and The Bernsteins, works that had slipped from history books at times because, as was the case with The Bernsteins, they privileged the imprecise incidence of memory and hearsay over hard documentary fact.

Unsurprisingly, the season pointed to the paradoxes that are inscribed within performance and that continue to make it such a vital force, raising, among others, questions of originality and whether it resides in the primary and often one-off event; a hierarchy of relations between historical document and contemporary re-enactment; whether a performance can be considered as a score, a time capsule launched into an unknown future to an unknown effect; the extent to which historical differences influence our

readings, and a consideration of how material they are in our readings of say a painting or a sculpture.

Most critical coverage focused in some depth on the re-staging of Carolee Schneemann’s *Meat Joy*, perhaps the best-known work to feature in the season. It involves eight participants who, over a period of about an hour, proceed to undress and smear each other with paint, fluids and meat, interacting with each other to the point that they become one, undifferentiated body of writhing and interconnecting limbs. Writing in *Artforum*, Rachel Withers noted

the work itself proved altogether less ‘energetic, evanescent, [and] physicalized’ (in Schneemann’s words) than many viewers were anticipating; the performance’s soporific mood belied its Motown sound track. Helpings of raw meat and mackerel eventually energized the proceedings, but not as planned: The event climaxed with a display of aggressive and defensive gestures rather than the ‘render exchanges’ of the artist’s conception.²

As Withers points, out a certain burden of anticipation and expectation defined our reactions to the piece. This was in part due to a feeling of something close to time travel, the excitement of witnessing a little bit of history repeated; but also due to the seminal status which has been ascribed to *Meat Joy* since it was first performed. The gap between art history and a form of mythology can be a narrow one in the case of performance art. In the absence of the primary event the work can become an empty sign liable to benign forms of interference and distortion, slightly corrupted along the airwaves of time. Schneemann herself was sanguine about the visibility of *Meat Joy*. In 1979 she published her own critical review of her practice under the title *More than Meat Joy*, in an attempt to re-contextualise the performance in the broader context of an ongoing critical enquiry. Like many performance artists, she is of course also acutely aware of the role that the photograph plays in shaping subsequent reception of her work, and sees in the iconicity of *Meat Joy*’s most celebrated image one of the reasons for its enduring success. It is interesting to note that Withers begins her review by mentioning that same photograph:

Tradition decrees that Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* be 'remembered' the wrong way up. The work's best-known documentary photo shows Schneemann and a co-performer zooming, as if airborne, toward the viewer, their be-feathered bosoms defying gravity – a dynamic effect achieved by displaying the photo true to the camera's view: upside-down.³

'Viewed the "right" way up' Withers wrote in reference to the re-staging of the performance, 'the image is less exuberant' [4]. Yet it is precisely in this lack of exuberance, in the slightly soporific effect that part of the work's original intention and significance lie. The performance began with Schneemann and her fellow participants seated round a table at the far end of the gallery, a large space between them and the audience, who were seated at the other end in theatre-style, raked seating. For about 20 minutes nothing much happened – they talked, applied make up, moved around in a confined space. Gradually music began to play, coloured lights went on and off and the participants moved forwards towards the audience, occupying the empty space as they undressed and smeared each other, dragged each other around and became lost in a tangle of limbs. Into the fray Schneemann appeared, making a rather grand entrance in the guise of a party hostess carrying trays of raw fish, sausages, chicken and other meat in the place of more conventional canapés. These she flung into the seething mass of writing bodies. With exaggerated gestures and the resounding 'whack' of a knife hitting a wooden chopping board, she cut the meat and began flinging it into the audience, who groaned and ducked as bits of flying fish filled the gallery – and us – with its unmistakable stench. Performance is of course a hybrid medium, and Schneemann has explicitly situated her early performances within an expanded and deconstructed notion of conventional theatre while continuing to define herself as a painter. The initial low key activity, and the feelings of boredom it generated in the audience, replaced representational with real time; while the actions' slow advance into the gallery, the gradual assault on the senses that the music, lights and smell provided, placed action and audience in the same physical space. At the same time, the interaction of colour and movement also served to transform the performance into a living and pulsating canvas, gesture and substance literally made flesh, actions brought

out of the studio and into the gallery and that triggered a palimpsest of references from the field of art history.

Of all the artists who took part in the first season of our series, Carolee Schneemann was perhaps the one who adhered most strictly to the original performance. Questioned during a conference we held at the start of the season about the potential futility of re-staging *Meat Joy* Schneemann responded with "Why not? It's an experiment". In the case of Schneemann's *Meat Joy*, it was one that in the eyes of many critics failed. At the time of its conception Schneemann had defined the work as having 'the character of an erotic rite: excessive, indulgent, a celebration of flesh as material: raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, transparent plastic, rope brushes, paper scrap. It's propulsion is toward the ecstatic – shifting and turning between tenderness, wilderness, precision, abandon: qualities which could at any moment be sensual, comic, joyous, repellent.'⁵ Conceived as an incremental performance that moved from stasis to climactic activity it proposed a blissed-out, polymorphous eroticism that appeared to many by now somewhat dated. 'In the three decades since these performances' Nancy Princenthal wrote in *Art in America* while reviewing an earlier retrospective of Schneemann's work,

public squeamishness has actually increased about some things Schneemann couldn't have predicted – biting raw chickens, for one, or, more momentously, having men haul women, cartoon-caveman-style, on their backs. But it's not just the spectacle of unreconstructed boy/girl posturing, nor the primitive nature of the documentation in which it survives, that has grown a bit embarrassing. Maybe it is, simply, the shapeless, shameless celebration of pleasure, unqualified by irony, ambiguity, danger or past pain, that now proves most difficult.⁶

After the performance, as with the others in the season, the gallery staged an in-conversation with Schneemann and the participants. As Jonathan Jones noted in *The Guardian*, it was as though they had become 'a communitarian mass, drugged by a sense of communal sexuality [who] mocked the intellectualized questions from the audience ... They felt made

anew, their minds blown, and it became painfully clear that they felt they had been there, and we hadn't.⁷

It is precisely this gap that the Irish artist Gerard Byrne explored in *New Sexual Lifestyles* (2003), which we showed as part of Season IV of *A Short History of Performance* in 2006. The season drew in part, on Nicolas Bourriaud's writings on Post Production, in which he argued that

artists' intuitive relationship with art history is now going beyond what we call the 'art of appropriation', which naturally infers an ideology of ownership; and moving toward a culture of the use of forms, a culture of constant activity of signs based on a collective ideal: sharing. The Museum, like the City itself, constitutes a catalogue of forms, postures, and images for artists – collective equipment that everyone is in a position to use, not in order to be subjected to their authority but as tools to probe the contemporary world... When artists find material in objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market, the work of art takes on a script-like value, 'when screenplays become form', in a sense.⁸

Shadows on screen, animated by a repertory of gestures drawn from the unconscious or as through from an imaginary museum of movement, animated the work of the artists brought together here, privileging translation, dubbing, translation, re-enactment etc.

Byrne's installation took as its starting point an interview published in *Playboy* magazine in 1973 also titled *New Sexual Lifestyles*, in which a panel of international experts explored questions designed to articulate the attitudes and ideologies of the sexual revolution. The panel included Betty Dodson, radical feminist, porn star Linda Lovelace and the editor of *Screw* magazine Al Goldstein. Their conversation included questions such as 'do affairs help marriage' or 'are there any limits to permissible – and desirable – behaviour?' Byrne took the transcript of the interview and used it as a script which he asked actors to perform to camera, and chose as setting for this re-enactment Goulding House, a late modernist villa set in the Irish

countryside and built shortly before the original interview was published. Byrne's work is situated along a series of paradoxical returns: modernist architecture, whose radical and rationalist ethos belies the messiness of lived experience, becomes the stage for a forward-looking discussion on the living, sexual body, a return of the repressed that dramatises a tension between mind and body that has recurred in the field of modernist representation; a pornographic magazine, inscribed within a logic of exploitation, is the site for a discussion on sexual freedom whose anti-elitism is pitted against avant-garde obscurantism; a real event and its artificial reconstruction bring into collision attitudes past with the sexual mores of the present in a country, Ireland, where homosexuality was legalised in 1993, divorce in 1997 and abortion to this day remains illegal. In the process, the work plays on our perceptions of the 'swinging sixties', addressing the present through the past while also reviewing the past against today's perceptions of it.

As TJ Demos argued in reviewing the work in *Artforum*, Byrne's work elicits 'the audience's critical distance rather than inviting its emphatic identification'. He goes on to argue that it

seems successfully to deploy Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, or technique of estrangement – but without its original didactic and ideological purpose ... Furthermore, Brechtian strategies also appear as historical relics: deployed as formal elements divorced from the politics that defined their historical urgency. This repurposing suggests that one can no longer count on a critical distance from either the present or the past, as for Byrne even the radical tools of modernism are easily assimilated and appropriated.⁹

Demos goes on to note that the work does more, however, than 'collapse into a void of pure negative criticality.' Despite the profound cultural changes that have taken place since the 60s and 70s, he finds that there is

still an emancipatory charge (rather than merely a melancholy sense of lost possibility) in that era's openness to unconventional

ways of life. Byrne's re-framings revivify this radicalism, as if he has somehow managed to bend his parentheses backward so that they enclose our own time, too. His manoeuvres theatricalize the present as well as the past, revealing both to be contingent and denaturalized, artificial and changing. In this way, the recovery of obsolete imagined worlds serves Byrne's ultimate goal: the reinvention of the present (and, with it, the future), which he makes possible by creating for his viewers a space of play – one that is open, unscripted, and undetermined – between art and life.¹⁰

Perhaps it might be possible to view re-stagings of performances as similar bends in parentheses, ones that, as was the case of *Meat Joy*, theatricalised our perceptions of the past as well as the present, revealing both to be 'denaturalized artificial and changing.' Or perhaps they can be celebrated as failures, as Lisa Le Feuvre has eloquently noted: 'gaps between intention and realization that produce a generative space ... [and] in doing so leave a space for engagement and maintaining an incomplete system.'¹¹ Art history is such a system, and performance the pearl that irritates the oyster; the event that comes, goes and refuses to let go, that keeps the system open.

.....

Postscript

Participating in the first season of the series, Hermann Nitsch presented *Lecture-Action: Basic Elements of the Orgies-Mysteries Theatre*, simultaneously a review of key elements from his ongoing project and a new performance within it. A series of tables were laid out with raw meat, fish, fruit, vegetables, entrails and a range of assorted fluids, around which Nitsch and his fellow performers were to stage a number of rituals. I'm not entirely sure what happened next: I think it was the mix between the constant note reverberating through the gallery as a result of three keys taped down on an electric keyboard; the vapours arising from the burning incense; the gong that periodically sounded; that combined to produce a

trance-like state in which everything went slightly out of control. Those who remained – some chose to leave – threw themselves with fair abandon into a tactile exploration of the flesh and fluids assembled, wading elbow deep and smearing matter across each table, flesh and liquid flowing off the tables and oozing across the gallery floors. It was interesting to hear from Nitsch himself, after the event had ended, that he had never quite experienced audience participation of that sort. He mused that perhaps he had incorrectly expressed himself in English, that his enjoinder to take part, meant more as a metaphorical expression of intellectual and spiritual engagement, had been mistranslated into a literal exhortation to get stuck in. It was a rather beautiful moment: an excess of participation found, not lost, in translation.



¹ Paul Schimmel, 'Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object', *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*, London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998, p.17.

² Rachel Withers, 'A Short History of Performance: Part One', *Artforum*, September 2002.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/works.html>

⁶ Nancy Princenthal, 'The arrogance of pleasure – body art, Carolee Schneemann', *Art in America*, October 1997.

⁷ Jonathan Jones, 'So that was the 1960s ...', *The Guardian*, Thursday, April 18, 2002.

⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Preface to the Second Edition', in *Post Production, Culture as Screenplay: How Art Programs the World*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York 2002, p 9.

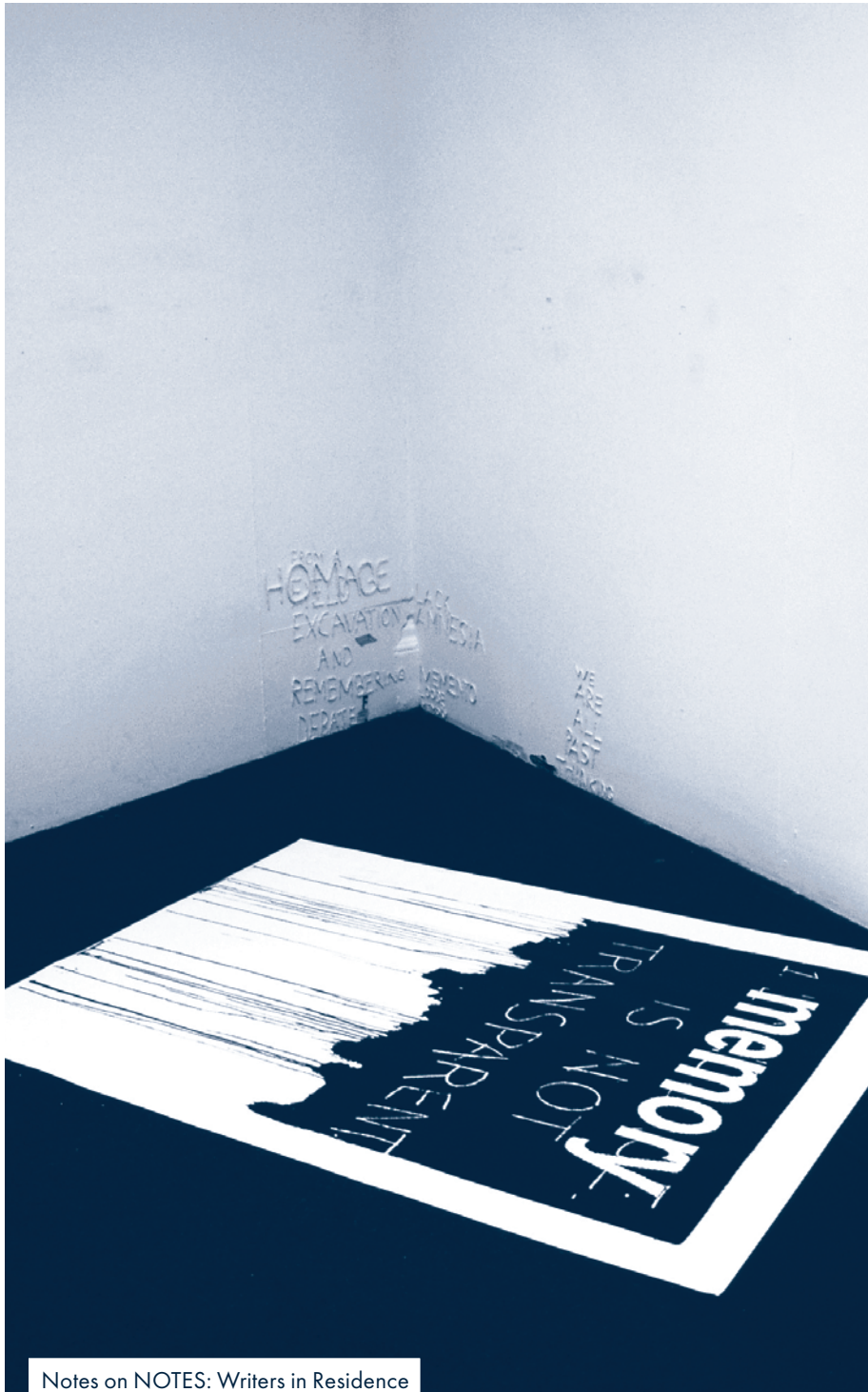
⁹ 'TJ Demos on Gerard Byrne', *Artforum*, Summer 2007.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lisa Le Feuvre, 'Art Failure', *Art Monthly*, No. 313, February 2008, pp. 5-8.

John Adams	Sarah Jane Edge	Brian Higgins	Ken Slater
Gillian Allnut	Frank Egdeell	Paul Holloway	Julian Maynard Smith
Anne Bean	Rose English	James Hugonin	Julie Stephenson
Helen Baker	Rose Finn-Kelcey	John Kippin	Gary Stevens
Liz Beech	Rose Garrard	Rob La Frenais	Nick Stewart
Jon Bewley	Stefan Gec	Vivien Lisle	Andre Stitt
Andrew Burton	Brian Gibson	Alison Lloyd	Grainne Sweeney
Ramsay Burt	George Gibson	Bruce McLean	Jane Vickers
Paul Burwell	Annie Griffin	John Millard	Stephen Taylor-Woodrow
David Butler	David Goard	Chris Osborne	Chris Wainwright
Sue Cannon	Ailsa Golding	Mark Pinder	David Ward
Gwen Carr	Mike Golding	Ben Ponton	Jez Welsh
Richard Clarkson	Beryl Graham	Nigel Rolfe	Ken White
Alex Collier	ew Greg	Monica Ross	Richard Wilson
Collier	Sue Griffiths	Steven Russell	Silvia Ziranek
Mike Collier	Mona Hatoum	Tom Savage	Sam Belinfante
Stephen Collins	Anne Hayes	Anne Seagrave	Sofia Greff
David Dye	Simon Herbert	Iggy Singh	Graham Hudson
			Meg Mosley
			Viola Yesiltac

The incomplete list of names on this wall records those who are part of an ongoing history of live artworks made at the Laing during the 1980s



Notes on NOTES: Writers in Residence
John Dummett

A context for Notes on a return

Mike Collier



Society has ... changed rapidly in (recent) years ... What has not changed is a gut-level desire to share and transmit personal shock and outrage; artists know, as we all do, that there may not be the unified carnage of a global war, yet territorial and ideological wars constantly cross the borders of countries all over the world. Other wars touch all of us everyday in the form of sexual inequality and racial bigotry... Such issues may not be explicit within specific time-based works, but they are implicit.¹

When we (Projects UK and the Laing) launched *New Work, Newcastle* in the mid 1980s, the cultural and political background at the time was brutal – seven years of the Thatcher government: the miners’ strike, the Falklands War, the lingering memory of the 1981 hunger strikes in N. Ireland and the legacy of Bobby Sand’s death; the attack on public services and the growth of privatisation and Thatcher’s statement that ‘There is no such thing as Society’.

This political content wasn’t overtly fore-grounded in any of the literature about *New Work, Newcastle* at the time, but (for me at least – and I think for Jon Bewley and Simon Herbert of Projects UK, as well) it was key to why the events happened when they did. It bubbled away under the texts we wrote explaining the rationale for presenting the work – and in the quotes from some of the artists. These artists had interesting/challenging things to say/explore. Their work was emotional and physically charged – it was visceral. It questioned the role of technology in our lives; it spoke of oppression and repression, of social taboos and the boundaries between legality and illegality, community and individuality. It worried about censorship and authoritarian control; about the traces of history; of truths and lies; it involved all our senses – not just vision. And it was poetic as well as political, radical and even hedonistic on occasions – nothing wrong with that! As Karen Finley, noted at the time:

With our technology, our civilisation, our supposed desire to end oppression there is still repression ... The political authorities try to take away the power of our bodies, our language – in turn our spirit, our souls ... All poets, all musicians, authors, artists, youth, you the audience, and us – we all better watch out.²

New Work Newcastle brought this critical practice centre stage; it took it away from the cultural margins. We were presenting Performance Art – radical/subversive practice – in a traditional art gallery. ‘Intervening’ in this formal space, interrogating the culture that the Laing appeared to represent – this was important. There was a real sense of challenging perceived stereotypes of what art was and its relationship to everyday life – to real events and issues that mattered. There was a good deal of support both locally and nationally for the collaboration between the Laing and Projects UK – the project probably attracted more funding than either of us could have achieved working separately. Crucially, what this gave both organisations was the opportunity to commission and showcase new work, and through a series of free publications and interpretive exhibitions we explored the roots of Performance Art, looking at what distinguished it as a practice. As the introduction to the first festival in 1986 suggested:

‘Performance Art’ ... has its roots in opposition ... By operating outside a structure of barter and exchange, ‘Performance Artists’ are making a political statement; the immediate and finite experience of ‘Performance’ by other individuals is of paramount importance; indeed, ‘Performance Art’ does not exist without the audience.³

But, what kind of audience? Who actually saw these ‘events’? In my experience, they had tended to be seen by audiences who already knew about Performance Art and who shared the views of the artists involved. So, who did this work really challenge? Was this really radical? Naively, I thought that by presenting critical/radical practice to a different/new audience, well away from metropolitan London – to an audience for whom this work was outside their comfort zone – that the term ‘radical practice’

might begin to take on a new meaning. The content of the work might still be operating on the margins, but it would be doing so within the walls of an establishment that represented ‘proper’ culture for most people in the North East. What would happen when ‘radical’ art was presented centre-stage in the Laing?

Well, we had good audiences (many from the arts up here, I agree – but also a good number of people for whom this was an entirely new experience). It was I believe, the artists themselves – the fact that they were alive (!) and prepared to ‘engage’ with an audience, that helped create this genuine interest. They also worked with the attendants in such a way that the memory of these events lives on, even now in the recollections of museum staff. *NOTES on a return* has proved how much is still remembered and how the attendants themselves are a form of living documentation to the work.

In 1987 although the project expanded (touring to two other venues in Bradford and Manchester), we still presented the ‘practice’ as one operating on the margins of culture/society. This was evident in the *New Work, Newcastle ‘87* title, *Confrontations*, and we stated in the publicity that:

Whilst the individual performances by artists span a wide range of sensibilities, they all reflect a common concern; an attempt to explore the ways in which we perceive our society and how we see ourselves operating within it. Performance artists operate on the fringe of this world; they present work within a live arena that exists outside the patterns and systems of second-hand, mediated, experience.⁴

What became clear by the end of this second festival was that the institution (the Laing), could only present Performance Art in the gallery as a radical and interventionist practice so many times; the ‘establishment’ was now taking this practice on board. Why was this; was this a good thing, or would the practice become neutered as a result? The third *New Work, Newcastle* festival moved the ‘agenda’ on again, further enlisting Edge (run by Rob La Frenais and Tracy Warr) in co-curating the event. This time

most of the performances occurred outside the gallery. This was a move on our part, at the Laing, to interact more actively with spaces outside the gallery institution – to see the *city* as a gallery. But, perhaps, it was also indicative of the fact that after two years, the initial impact of ‘breaking into’ the establishment no longer held the same urgency or immediacy?

The three NWN festivals placed radical practice centre stage; a position that sometimes sat uneasily within Tyne & Wear Museum Services (TWMS). Don’t get me wrong – TWMS had, initially, been very supportive of ‘radical’ practice – but, looking back, I think it was the energy; the activity; the aliveness of the work that my colleagues liked. I am not sure how much sympathy they had with the content – and so when artists presented a genuine challenge (social, political or cultural), and one that was genuinely edgy (in that, say, the content was sexually explicit), then the institution didn’t have the necessary commitment to the work to back it up when the ‘going got tough’ – which it, inevitably, did. Looking at it from TWMS’ point of view, I think that the ‘institution’ – and the people at the top – were initially intrigued and excited by the challenge that the artists and the practice presented, and, to a certain extent enjoyed ‘playing’ the role of an enlightened and benevolent patron. But was the practice being ‘patronised’? Over time, I guess, the constant ‘sniping’ at the idea of institutions and what they represented by this area of Live Art became tiresome and irritating (a question of the practice biting the hand that fed it?) – and it lost its mystique. Also, during the course of my time at the Laing, I saw the role of the Museum change. It went from being an organisation that curated, cared for and questioned culture (of the region) to a service industry and supplier of entertainment (what John Kippin once called the ‘sugar-coating of history’) – all about audience numbers. There is nothing wrong with wanting more people to visit the museum – this is a good thing – but when it comes at the expense of a loss of a kind of social integrity, then it worries me.

Coda

The call from Sophia in 2007/08 came out of the blue – I understand that having been appointed a Curatorial Fellow at the Laing, she was looking

through the Gallery archive and came across one small reference to a festival of Performance Art that had been presented in the gallery in the 1980s. It was interesting (and perhaps revealing) that apparently no file or archive existed in the institution about these events. Maybe, the Gallery didn’t value these events; or, maybe, no records were taken just because they weren’t – people were too busy to record the events – one of the problems inherent in presenting new commissions of live work. Conspiracy theory or cock-up? Probably, I guess, a bit of both!

However, it is fair to say that even *IF* the Laing had archived material about the *New Work, Newcastle* events, such material would not, in any way, have given a sense of what we were trying to achieve. For instance, it would not have recorded peoples’ responses to these events or outlined the key role played by individuals such as Ritchie Clarkson and his team of attendants – or Paul Holloway and Janet Ross (along with Arts Council Trainees, Alison Lloyd and Ingrid Swenson) who together with myself formed the Arts Development Team. I was, initially, it has to be said, a little wary of getting involved in *NOTES on a return* (since these events happened a long time ago, and I have moved on) but when Sophia explained that she was keen to interview and re-present the work done by these people, I became interested. I would say that one of the (many) great things, for me, about this project, is that it has highlighted how crucial the impact of people like our attendants and support staff were – without them, these events would not have happened.

I don’t think it really matters whether or not *New Work, Newcastle* affected **great** change **immediately**. But I do think it was important that we were able to commission new work by artists that cared and were passionate; work of a radical nature that challenged preconceptions about culture and society. I would like to think that, over a period of time, these events had some impact on the culture of the region. Evolution rather than revolution, affected by committed artists and curators working at the margins.

But how much change has really occurred in the last 20 years? We now have BALTIC in the North East and Tate Modern is one of the UK’s top



three tourist attractions in the country. You can't argue with the facts – challenging contemporary art has made big inroads into the cultural life of the North East and the Country as a whole. But, the UK is now fighting two wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan; the BNP is gaining in popularity; the gap between rich and poor in Britain has doubled over the past 30 years and is now the widest of any country in Europe (TUC Report, 2008). As was noted in the opening quote, 'wars touch all of us everyday in the form of sexual inequality and racial bigotry'. So, how much progress has been made? My conclusion: we need projects such as *NOTES on a return* that continue to champion the radical work made by artists working on the margins of society – artists who are prepared to look critically at life – we must not become complacent. This fascinating project has achieved many things, but I hope that one of its lasting legacies will be to have explored, and reminded us, of important issues in a way that 'may not be explicit within specific time-based works but ... [remains] implicit.'



¹ From the promotional leaflet for New Work, Newcastle '88 in association with Edge 88
² Karen Finlay
³ From the promotional leaflet for New Work, Newcastle '86
⁴ From the promotional leaflet to *New Work, Newcastle '87, Confrontations*

Above left to right: Mike Collier, Richie Clarkson, Grainne Sweeny and Paul Holloway in the Monkey Bar. The Market Lane Tavern was nicknamed the Monkey Bar because in years gone by on pay-day, when local builders came to drink in the pub, the bar owner would take their hods (which were colloquially called 'monkeys') off them and store them behind the bar, only returning them after their drinks had been paid for! So the monkeys were used as deposits!

ALISTAIR MACLENNAN
LIE TO LAY
 5 day performance/installation for inside a specific derelict building, Newcastle upon Tyne

SEARCH
 Culture/Nature
 Man/Woman
 White/Black People

Notes from Monkey Bar

Mike Collier [MC] (formerly Head of the Art Development Strategy at the Laing), *Paul Holloway [PH]* (formerly Education Officer for the Art Development Strategy at the Laing) and *Richie Clarkson [RC]* (formerly Chief Attendant at the Laing) in conversation in the Monkey Bar (the Market Lane Tavern), Newcastle, January 30, 2009.

[PH] I remember Mona – I thought she was wonderful to work with. I was sad to hear that she feels kind of unhappy about her experience. *Position:Suspended* was a really powerful piece of work ... but it was wrong, what happened.

[RC] I think Mona loved the North East, but the way she was treated ... I mean it was hard – Mind, she liked a pint, and she had a sense of humour! Remember Mona's [piece], with the chicken wire – it looked like a chicken coop? Well, I phoned Mike up on the Friday night, I said, "Mike, what are we doing with these twelve bloody chickens of Mona's that are running around the garage?" "What d'ya mean?" he said, horrified (thinking he was in trouble again!) I says, "They're running about the bloody garage – I can't set the alarms for the weekend, the chickens will set them off. What're we going to do?" And Mona was in on this, too

[MC] I thought – It's the RSPCA [who] are going to be really upset. And then Richie and Mona said to me, "How are you going to look after them over the weekend – who's going to feed them?"

[RC] And Mike believed it. It was about half past four, you know, on Friday afternoon and [we] finish 5 o'clock. I says, "These bloody chickens, running all over the damn place!" But of course there weren't any chickens!

[MC] So what did you think about it, working on New Work Newcastle?

[RC] You're mad! [Laughter] Then I understood more because the artists explained their work to me. I could see what was happening with it. I wouldn't have picked the catalogue up and said "this is so-and-so and that's so-and-so" (but) you could understand what these people were trying to do. They were expressing themselves. They hadn't just said "Oh, we'll do this just for money.", it wasn't about that – it's not. They were putting their heart into it, which I thought was fantastic. ... All the lads I worked with, we all thought the same at first – oh, what a load of bloody rubbish – but it's not – not once you get into it. You see more.

[PH] I remember some of the other fellas saying that they were really into the programme because they were fed up with Newcastle being viewed as cloth caps and whippets, shipbuilding and redundancy and all that. And actually there was a kind of mood like we're sick of that, we've done that, let's move on.

[RC] Let's go and do something new; and that's what it was every day in the gallery – this is happening, that's happening...

[RC] Give it a chance.

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Photo: Chris Wainwright

... false memory . . . begins to take over
that, is the power of the writer

Notes on NOTES: Writers in Residence (detail)
Matthew Hearn

Nostalgia for the Future

Simon Herbert



It's 1985 and I fiddle with the mixing desk; one of the pan pots doesn't seem to be working, and my crash course in basic sound mixing has evaporated in the tension of the moment. It's 30 minutes until we let the audience in to one of the display rooms of the Laing Art Gallery, and as it's my first event as Projects UK Assistant I desperately need everything to go without a hitch. After a few minutes of arbitrary and hopeful fiddling, I manage to send the audio track to the previously inert left speaker, and ... we're ready.

25 minutes to go. If I have achieved that first state of Zen of the event producer – what I will later recognize as a state of merely suspended grace, prone at any future point to the calamitous list of screw-ups that can happen during the real time unfolding of a performance – my calm is mirrored, bizarrely, by the sight of a six-foot plus woman, dressed in a fabulous ball gown, entering the space, tranquility wafting after her like cheap perfume. This is Rose English. She seems classically trained. She can enunciate. She is friendly. She is wearing Mickey Mouse ears. And holding a shotgun.

She puts the mock weapon (plastic?) down. Gathers herself at the side of the space ... breathes in and out, slowly and deeply. She pushes her arms out and twists to the left, then back, like she's moving energy around, begins to bend and weave and starts to rotate slowly around the perimeter of the room. Her Mouseketeer ears rotate like tiny malignant satellite dishes, scanning the contents of the large vertical vitrines – a silver-tipped rhino horn, pewter dishes, snuff-boxes – and finding no signs of postmodern life.

Two of the gallery attendants stand in back with me, transfixed. "What's Mickey doing?" one whispers. The other leans over and hisses "Shuddup, man, don't you know nothing? That's tai chi, that is. Mickey's warming up."



Memory is a bitch, and it does not love us. It gives us saggy asses and tits, and earlier memories of better. It shows us that people whom we thought we trusted were never actually our friends, and that we wasted decades on them. It gilds the lily and frosts the cake; it implies that because our original recollections aren't significant enough to be recalled with crystal clarity, that they are shabby jewels indeed. And it's only a short leap from there to make us think that maybe our dreams are not so special, just everyone else's. Memory is a cheat. Memory is for losers. It makes shit up.

I made parts of this story up. The truth is that, other than Rose's *tai chi*, the hypnotic calmness of it, and the attendant's response, everything else is up for grabs. I have no idea what contents were actually in those cases; other than, seeing that every summer in the Laing Art Gallery, lines of excruciatingly bored school children were led past them, a rhino horn seems an appropriate conceit, what with its suggestions of stimulation and longevity. I also think I might be confusing the technical issues with the mixing desk with Rose Garrard's performance a week or two later ...

Now, I know that you don't really care – that you're probably content to think I'm either just cursed with poor recall (boring), prone to embellishment (slightly more interesting) or intent on using fabrications in a cunning pre-determined manner (that would certainly be *sexiest*: layers of Hegelian onion-skins peeled and revealed as 'truths', as we shake our heads with knowing laughter at the prospect of yet another jolly romp through those ever so clever art world tours of smoke and mirrors) – but now that you *know* that I know that *you* don't care, and that *you* know that I don't care either, we can now proceed, perhaps, without any sense of preciousness or self-aggrandizement on my part, or rictus of studious interest on yours.

Good. I'm glad we got that sorted.

Of the other performances re-visited for *NOTES on a return*, I have similarly incomplete memories. Mostly these fragments don't lend themselves to one particular or complete narrative nugget – set in aspic – which is why I chose the Rose English memory to 'open' with. It, conveniently allies itself with the set-up, delivery, and punch-line of conventional story-telling, or (as in the case of Mona Hatoum's piece) there is less memory of the event than accreted deliberation after the fact. Of course, I *can* recall specific moments from each of these events, but all that after-the-fact stuff has been overlaid since, and made the original propositions opaque.

But, for what it's worth: I remember the excited anticipation of Nigel Rolfe's live action, *The Rope* – of his entombing his head within a wound ball of Irish sisal twine – not least because he'd been my mentor at art school in previous years, and his process embodied everything I wanted to be, myself, as an artist at the time: simple, elegant, muscular, conceptual, humane. I remember the silence in the space, except for the artist's increasingly muffled breathing escaping from under the accumulating sphere of twine (it was like water: finding its own way out). The metronome providing the momentum for a story whose ending could be anticipated 30 seconds after the beginning of the action; but the audience stayed anyway, hypnotized, until the end. I remember how physically vulnerable Nigel was (having metaphorically wrapped himself in someone else's history) when we led him away, blind, at the end of the work.

Other than for this essay, I had stopped thinking about that piece a long time ago; except for the fact that, in the editing of a documentation video of the first season of *New Work, Newcastle* – a one-hour tape edited in four 20-hour shifts in a freezing edit suite in Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design in Dundee – I got one of the metronome edits wrong and only noticed after a good night's sleep, once back in Newcastle upon Tyne. Never corrected, that missed beat has turned up in my mind often since, more than the original work. It still troubles me in the waking hours of 5am, the eternal prospect of trying really, really hard and still fucking up.

My memories of Bruce Mclean and David Ward's *Good Violence and Physical Manners* (both parts) are 23 light years distant from their original radio-static concatenation: an appalling wall of sound that was unbearably harsh on the ears, and offered little sustenance for the brain. It was part of Mclean's ongoing raspberry-fart against convention and expectation, entirely absent of the po-faced can't of early Futurist experimental soundscapes, but just as devoid of aesthetic nourishment. The pleasure I got, perversely, was that something so grating could be repeated in an almost identical format the following day; kind of like a schoolboy proudly shouting "Arse!" repeatedly until he's exhausted all of his audience except himself.

I remember nothing of substantive detail from Anne Bean's *Pain(tings)* – and it happened a year later, the opener for the next festival in 1987 – but it doesn't take an anthropologist to surmise that the performance was about feminist practice in relation to the male-centric art world, served on a bed of liberating eccentricity. Anne was an awesome personality to me, ever since I'd met her a couple of years earlier on *The Touring Exhibitionists* (Projects UK taking a group of artists on a magical mystery nationwide bus tour, performing at six venues in a week), where she wore some utterly cool *Planet of the Apes* boots (with a separate compartment for the big toe, kind of like a foot mitten), and after that, in my eyes, she could do no wrong. I recall the broad strokes of the event itself: the bass profundo voice (like the actress Fenella Fielding, but on smack), the gestures, the sense of unpredictability that Anne always exudes, never repeating one goddamned thing in her performances; everything fresh and new, and safety-net be damned.



I *do* remember Mike Collier, the Laing Curator who wanted to bring innovative art into the museum (and who took that risk, to work with Projects UK, in the first month of his new job, which took some moxie), grimacing when Anne explained how she wanted to set fire to one of her own paintings as part of the action. His reaction was understandable, perhaps, given that the year before the fiery indoor climax of The Bow Gamelan's Ensemble post-industrial concert – which had tripped off the Laing's fire alarm system – was crashed by the Tyne and Wear Metropolitan Fire Brigade, who found no fire, but got their first on-the-job ovation from a sitting audience. I remember us teasing Mike afterwards that that certainly counted as 'new audiences'.

On a sourer note, I am ashamed of what got away from us during the management of Mona Hatoum's performance *Position: Suspended*. I have queasy sensations that colour my memories. To start at the start: I remember an engaging work, in which Mona had constructed her own tiny triangular



'ghetto' and moved slowly, covered in clay, back and forth, trapped in this shanty cage of chicken wire and corrugated metal; the artist feeling the blades and spurs of suspended tools bump against her skin as she walked purposefully through and against them. Saw blades, axe heads and sickles hanging like pendulums of political imperative, potentially lacerating in cycles between inertia and momentum. I don't think, for me at least, there's been a finer metaphor for the Middle East situation. The Laing, however, was worried that the artist wanted to make the work in the nude, and insisted that she wear some form of body-covering, in case wandering urchins would have their eyes blasted out by the sight of a nipple. Mona and Projects UK relented so that the work could continue, and she performed the piece in a tan body-stocking that did everything to eroticize the artist's body – a piece of filigree, coquettishly spanning her cleavage and the clags of clay like a Howard Hughes' wet-dream – and make ridiculous the idea of a generic corporeal form; more stripper than stripped away.

The Laing played its get-out-of-jail card: that this was their first foray into experimental art, and institutions had to balance radicalism with public

accountability, etc. etc., that they needed time to blood the hounds, so to speak. Projects UK, caught between civic diktat with our new collaborator, and our responsibility to Mona, sat on the fence of the artist's decision. I still believe we were at least right in this, because that is just the proper form: because that is just the proper form for these circumstances, what we did then and have done ever since: if Mona had decided so, we would have pulled the work.

All self-congratulation aside, this still left us somehow absolved, but poor Mona conflicted, alone with her own canon, a difficult decision to be made. My main memory is painting her body with the clay as she fumed in silence, her anger tangible; of how the wet earth adhered easily and beautifully to her back, but fell off the nylon one-piece, or gathered down the inside of the costume in clumps at the top of her ass. It made about as much sense as a burkha and suspender belts. And then off she went to her cage, already compromised, to that site of metaphorical disempowerment ... No wrongdoers, maybe. But wrong was done.

If this isn't what you wanted or expected, then I'm afraid I don't know what to tell you (if it's okay for art to deal with the subconscious, then it's okay for me to tell you, quite honestly, that I remember Anne Bean's boots more than the specifics of her performance; Rose's warming up more than her performed dialogue. Ask Man Ray: these are the things that *stick*.). The thing is, *the thing was*, truth to tell, that we at Projects UK always tended to be uncomfortable injecting ourselves too visibly into the program of events. There was an artist. There was an event. And there was an audience. We worked so hard to make everything seamless, and let the work speak for itself, that it feels somehow self-serving or touchy-feely (for me at least) to swan around putting our heads above the parapets years later; especially in a culture that has become so publicly confessional over recent years and yielded so little of substance. I actually prefer that whole stiff-upper-lip, keep your powder dry, don't give them your name Pike, sort of thing ...

It's not like I'm serving out gems, here, anyway. All the above must seem like thin intellectual gruel, indeed, if one was looking to glean academic insights from my 'memory fragments' into the dynamics of Performance Art

and its evolution over the decades, measured against, say, the seminal writing of art critics in the 70s and 80s: those ‘intensities of time and space’¹ demarcated by Chantal Pontbriand, Roselee Goldberg, or Lucy R. Lippard; propositions of great precision and imagination.

It seems to me that the writers of that time did a pretty good job of defining the basic tenets of Performance Art on a formal level (and if you don’t know what they are then you’re in the wrong essay, and I can’t imagine why you’ve read this far ...); and it seems to me that these elements have hardly changed since.

Performance Art may be in fashion, or out of fashion, at any given time, and it’s not like there’s much difference either way in terms of substantive numbers of participants (nationwide, the audience for Live Art is probably less, annually, than the attendance difference between a UEFA Cup quarter and semi-final at St. James’ Park). Performance Art has, purposefully, always sought a niche audience that wants to see weird shit outside of the mainstream, witnessing actions in real time and space, in an intimate environment.

Measured against the flip-flopping of art paradigms and mediums that feed the junkie-need for novelty for the *chatterati* in all arenas – commercial, museum, artist-run – of the art world since, say, the first *New Work, Newcastle*, 23 years ago, what aura Performance Art maintains (whether this aura shines like a beacon, or a keyring light, is a different topic) it does so because it survives essentially distinct and unsublimated. Remember when all those electronic curators first started walking around with iPods in their parkas and curated ‘electronic actions’ for cyberspace. These works had none of the immediacy of Live Art, and the theory was merely self-important in a kind of *Ceci n’est pas une pipe, c’est une pipe de bandwidth* way: you had to wait ages for the next frozen staccato upload, and it was all just a bit, well ... shit! When every other art form is rolling around in the aisles of international art fairs, mixing styles and exchanging fluids like popper-sniffers at an 80s steam room – return to figuration, kitchen sink doodles, pan-global deadly dull photographs of construction sites, OCD flibbertigibbets, crystals, abstraction, anime, post-pornographic, lenticular, chewy, lowbrow, highbrow,



eyebrow – Performance Art has, wisely, tended to act like the vicar’s daughter at the orgy; keeping her legs clamped together and her big bloomers hiked up (“No. I’m *only* into unmediated experience. Finite, untrammelled intensity. Now please, go away”).

There’s something contrary in me, however, that doesn’t just want Performance Art, especially the events that we commissioned, to sit there all inviolate, and self-contained; illuminated just by historical anecdote, or the documentation, or theories formulated decades ago. I like to think that what we all did back then was important enough (not cancer cure important, for sure, or *Star Wars* digitally remastered DVDs important) that it might resonate in the present, might have some import. How very apt, in retrospect, that these events happened *in* a museum. I don’t think we ever thought it through far enough to realize that, sexy value clashes aside, these performances would become artifacts of that institution; the equivalents of a silver-tipped rhino horn, captured and whittled at, *exotica redux*. I certainly didn’t anticipate *NOTES on a return*, for instance.



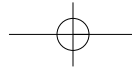
For what it's worth, I think it's both fair and accurate to recount that there were a broad series of principles back then – admittedly loose ones, context-specific, and by no means agreed upon by all – evinced by most artists and curators (and audiences too), which tended to assume a consensus that Live Art was a radical art form that was anti-object, oppositional to commercial exchange, and propelled by a rocket fuel of intentionality to keep things *real*, in the moment. There was also that unmistakable sense of taboo: of proscenium arches exploded and bourgeois narrative structures shattered. That hasn't changed since, unless I've missed something (entirely possible), but broader changes in culture have accreted subsequent layers of rider and perspective over the codas held at that time, and some of the labels we attached, *specifically about the collective memory of events and the ownership of them*, might actually be more fluid than we'd anticipated.

The performances at the Laing were experienced by those who turned up, and only thereafter in secondary formats as either still images, edited

video compilations, or master material too fragile to be allowed to be viewed in their entirety by the casual or even obsessed student of the form (and it's sad that digitization funds still seem to be needed to finally preserve the entirety of The Locus+ Archive). We recorded the performances on video machines the size of breeze-blocks that we lugged about back then, afraid to point the umbilical camera lens at a candle – and what did Performance Art have, if it did not have candles! – for fear of immolating our fragile video tubes. The evidence of these unique events that remains is murky and primitive in comparison with the lustrous terra-pixels per nanometer that are captured on digital cameras – smaller, now, than a packet of Benson & Hedges – or camera phones, and uploaded onto websites for the potential purview of everyone: Everywhere. 'Intimate' space now means a different thing, when we can see the 'floss-thonged-snatches' of female pop singers playing peek-a-boo as they emerge onto the sidewalks of Hollywood Boulevard from their coal black Lake Tahoe SUVs (this is not an art action by Annie Sprinkle); homeless people paid in booze to fistfight each other under freeway overpasses (this is not a conceptual struggle between Iain Robertson and Stuart Brisley); or even spectators reacting to off-screen footage of two women eating shit from a cup (no, not even a Foucault essay disappearing up the fundament of its own gaze, or a Georges Bataille-inspired durational event).

And if you want to get *really* postmodern, you can log onto YouTube right now, put 'Chris Burden' in your search engine, and in five seconds begin to watch a cocky youngster faux-recreating Chris Burden performances in order to take the piss; this lame pastiche seen by more casual surfers than ever turned up on Venice Beach for the original action.

These frivolities are not, let's be clear, fuelled by the same impulse that made Mona Halton walk into a cage of objects that prodded at the meniscus of her flesh, or why Nigel Rolfe suffocated himself, or why David Ward twiddled the knob of a radio receiver – a composer/vomiter of white noise, one eyebrow raised. But these memories and recordings do now exist in the same continuum, 23 years after we all sat around talking about abstract principles of cultural democratisation and visceral unmediated communication. We didn't know that 'user content' so shabby and radical (and, okay, yes,



let's be fair: wonderful and awesome, too, if you like that kind of thing; or just make a living, or beer money, from writing essays like this) would come down the pipeline of the Interweb. That a disposable and voracious collective memory would be constructed, grazed easily and compulsively, *existing in all points of time and space simultaneously and forever around all water coolers in all post-industrial builds every Monday morning* like a bad Damien Hirst title.

In retrospect, the performance artist's coach journey on the Rapide from King's Cross to Gallowgate, back in 1986, seems medieval in comparison now; a pre-Enlightenment pilgrimage, as undertaken by the Inquisitor Bernardo Gui in *The Name of the Rose*. All clattering hooves and inquisitorial desperation to keep the sacrosanct connections of Live Art within a circle of devotees: hidden and mysterious and wonderful; unsullied by those peasants who would get their hands on books and knowledge and mouse buttons, and animated smileys for their Facebook pages. The collective memory that surrounds the events of *New Work, Newcastle* is tiny, minute, sub-atomic, infinitesimal in comparison to the exchanges built between colonies – nations – of strangers every second of every day in contemporary life. That may be an obvious observation, but it does make those of us who were there, audiences and curators and artists, trolling along to the Laing to see work which was intended to breakdown barriers and initiate a new communion ... nothing less (in the academic sense) than *privileged*.

Now that we've all put our aqualungs on, and we're collectively engaged in a dive to the bottom of *everything*, the actions of performance artists in the 80s – often referred to at the time, by both supporters and declamators, as degradations – now exist as rose-tinted counterpoints to the casual debasements of the internet carnivale; the tribal hazings of outsiders via teenage cell phone Mafias; the *twitterings* of fiercely-archived reports from people with nothing interesting to say.

The actions of *New Work, Newcastle* have been recast – fittingly, as the artists responsible for them did not then, or now, believe that art exists in an hermetically-sealed bell jar, untouched by a wider society – as far more precious than the original freeform manner of their origination might have

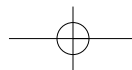
appeared. Their taboos and ironies, japes and rages, gestures and desires, are now quaint but radical, explicit but coy, horrified but tender. Not designed or marketed for the convenience of consumers.

In this context I can now rid myself of memory. I can see these events new in 2009, and clearly: shamanic acts for a society that was already beginning to leech itself of magic.

The title of this essay is with apologies to John Kippin. This essay is dedicated to the art critic Stuart Morgan: who knew everything important about art, and even more about honesty.



¹ *Performance: Text(e)s & Documents*, PARACHUTE, 1981



to rescue, record and restage actions
of which no records were made

NOTES on a return

Archival Exhibitions

Rose English

9 May – 27 May 2009

Plato's Chair

(Performed on 11 April 1985 in Art on Tyneside)

Archival Exhibition: Exhibition Gallery

Audio Installation: Exhibition Gallery & Art on Tyneside

Bruce McLean

30 May – 17 June 2009

Good Violence and Physical Manners

(Performed on 6 & 7 February 1986 in the Marble Hall)

Archival Exhibition: Exhibition Gallery

Audio Installation: Exhibition Gallery & Marble Hall (the old entrance)

Nigel Rolfe

20 June – 8 July 2009

The Rope

(Performed on 31 January 1986 in Art on Tyneside)

Archival Exhibition: Exhibition Gallery

Audio Installation: Exhibition Gallery & Art on Tyneside

Anne Bean

11 July – 29 July 2009

"Pain"(tings)

(Performed on 1 May 1987 in Art on Tyneside)

Archival Exhibition: Exhibition Gallery

Audio Installation: Exhibition Gallery & Art on Tyneside

Mona Hatoum

1 August – 18 August 2009

Position: Suspended

(Five hour durational performance performed on 28 February 1986, Gallery A)

Archival Exhibition: Exhibition Gallery

Audio Installation: Exhibition Gallery & Gallery A

Notes on NOTES: Writers in Residence (detail)
Matthew Hearn



The Young Lady's Stoppers Photo: Paul Armstrong

Reviews

Her voice enunciates with the studied precision of an elocution teacher and her choreographed hand movements elegantly emphasize its cadences. The physicality of her performance is self-consciously exaggerated. Dressed in a Romantic-length ballet dress she dances occasional short ballet pastiches which end up with a short classical mime which she then explains is meant to indicate 'how very close to my heart the theme of this afternoon's performance is.' She continually appears to be leading up to explaining what the piece is about but either gets distracted or drops meaningful but obscure remarks: 'the performers' body is a sacred vessel. It is at once completely empty and is at once completely full... This afternoon's performance is dedicated to the void... All I'm doing is being alive! The word alive is repeatedly shouted with sententious sonority, but how seriously should we take this, or the incident where she bends double and loudly cries into a beautiful old lace handkerchief, or another moment where she smears theatrical blood onto her hands and holds them out to the audience? Gradually we become aware that English is drawing on a larger body of material, and that different performances may assemble this in different ways, even drawing on different parts of it — hence the title *Plato's Chair*. Plato proposed that objects in this world were corrupted versions of ideal models that existed on another dimension. This concept for English becomes a metaphor for performing. *Plato's Chair* at Newcastle was a partial version of an ideal that only exists fully in her imagination, and its 'corruption' comes from her responsiveness to the specific context in which she is performing, and the way the audience behaves and reacts. On another level her representations of woman — as romantic ballerina or melodramatic actress — are corrupted versions of another sort of 'ideal', an oppressive social construct, which it is English's achievement that she manages to expose in such an entertaining way that she has her audience painfully near to hysterics.

At the end of the piece, English describes a dream about breaking into a building (which is obviously the performance venue) and stealing an antique chair, Plato's chair, of which the chair she uses in the performance is a modern and corrupt version. It is she says a dream of such importance that it is changing her life; and this is where she makes the remark about giving up being a fine art entertainer and becoming a philosopher. Fine art, dance, philosophy, theatre — that these categories are becoming confused with one another is an emotional current of our times. In an essay on sculpture in the recent anthology *Past-modern Culture* (Pluto, 1985) Rosalind Krauss argues that the increasing irrelevance of these categories constitutes a break with tradition, a deconstruction of the modern order rooted in the eighteenth century. Enlightenment with its distinct and autonomous disciplines.

For within the situation of post-modernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium — sculpture — but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms for which any medium — photography books, lines

on a wall, mirrors or sculpture itself — might be used.

We are now familiar with the term post-modern when applied to dance, although the difference between it and modern dance has not always been clearly explained. *Plato's Chair* is useful as an example of the post-modern break. The dance conventions English exploits are precisely those that modern dance has rejected as kitsch, and the lack of avant garde or shock tactics in *Plato's Chair* clearly distinguishes it from performances with their roots in Dada and futurism. There is an increasing loss of confidence in progress either as a political or artistic ideology. Rather than producing art that is ahead of its time or that is attacking bourgeois conventions (perceived as out-moded), more and more artists now see their role as cunning survivors who resist the state and its hegemonic control. In *Plato's Chair* English is saving fragments from the ruins, resisting received ideas and roles, and reassembling the practice of performing in a way relevant to her experience.

Ramsay Burt

Sculptures into Dance Part 2

Deborah Thomas at the Battersea Arts Centre, London

There has been something of a revival of interest over recent years in movement theatre, using sculptures, design, and movement to create a total theatre of symbols. It is perhaps a reaction against the cinema, which captured the heads and hearts of pre-war movement theatre exponents, and the difficulty of finding an effective literary rhetoric in a time of massive dissemination of words over television and radio. The work of Deborah Thomas does not fit easily into this revival. It is more dancerish, personal, and human in scale than the work of Rational or Impact Theatres, less dramatic than works like *The Bearded Lady* at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Collaborations with choreographers have not come easily to her, and more people have seen her sculptures in the dehumanized and static situation of the gallery: *Sculptures into Dance Part 1* at Advanced Graphics, and *Part 2* at Battersea Arts Centre. *Part 2* is a startling exhibition, the absence of colour ('it complicates things' — Thomas) and the sheer scale of the sculptures, hanging expectantly in space, create a mysterious, if not magical environment. Giant tutus, made of layers of white tissue paper, waiting to claim a body in order to be animated. Drooping skirts, one with hands emerging from its pleats, another covered in small white bobbles, each have a harness to control their animator. Doughnuts of tissue paper on one wall, transparent equine heads on another, frame an inverted fan of black plastic. This last is a skirt reminiscent of Fellini at his wildest, a boat of a thing, with the wingspan of an albatross and the

Revisiting *Plato's Chair*: writing and embodying collective memory

Ramsay Burt



In 1985 I wrote a review of Rose English's performance *Plato's Chair* at the Laing Art Gallery. My review evaluated *Plato's Chair*, in fact not as a performance but as if it were a piece of dance. My aim in this text is to revisit my review and examine some questions about memory and recollection that it raises. The review was subsequently published in *New Dance*, a British magazine dedicated to covering experimental dance practice. The fact, that after sitting on it for a few months, they eventually decided to print it indicates the extent to which, in the early 1980s, disciplinary boundaries between experimental dance and what is now called Live Art were beginning to congeal. My proposal that *Plato's Chair* could be considered a dance was intended as a slightly mischievous way of opening up questions about the ontology of dance performance. What I actually wrote became key, earlier this year, to my remembering the work as part of *NOTES on a return*. While not ignoring the fact that the piece consisted of a long improvised monologue, my review emphasised the embodied aspects of the performance, claiming that the piece foregrounded the corporeality of English's presence. In retrospect, it seems to me that my review explores the tension between the mostly verbal, archival traces of *Plato's Chair* and those physical aspects of its performance that largely escape the written record because they are embodied experiences that are hard to document and preserve.

The process of remembering is, I suggest, an important aspect of *NOTES on a return*. This becomes evident when one places this project in the context of two other comparable projects. For 'Crash Landings Revisited (and more)', the Brussels-based writer and dramaturge Myriam van Imschoot has been interviewing participants in the *Crash Landings* series of improvised dance performances that Meg Stuart, Christine De Smedt and David Hernandez curated between 1996 and 1999. Earlier this year in Ljubljana, Janez Janša, formerly Emil Hrvartin, ran a series of events marking the 40th Anniversary of the emergence of the Pupiliija Ferkeverk Group. The latter was a group of Yugoslavian visual artists who, in 1969, created an experimental performance

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Rose English, *Plato's Chair*

Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Rose English says she is a 'fine art entertainer who is changing into a philosopher'. Her lunchtime performance of *Plato's Chair* at the Laing Gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne was linked with the showing there of the touring exhibition of feminist art 'Pandora's Box'. Her performance shares with much of the work a concern for making re-appropriations from our predominantly male culture of the way women are represented. In the exhibition this is seen in the reworkings of the myth of Pandora and in plundering and subverting the often stereotyped images of women we almost take for granted. In *Plato's Chair*, English plunders a rich diversity of traditions — classical ballet, music hall, philosophy lecture, melodrama — to create an almost disturbingly strong female persona. In her use of these borrowed styles there are similarities between her work and that of Laurie Booth and Fergus Early. She also has had a long association with Jacky Lansley and Sally Potter. In particular, English makes more skilful use than any of them of directly addressing the audience. This has its roots in music hall and, like Max Wall, she singles out latecomers and tells them she sympathizes with them, picks up on any accidental interruptions, and keeps an almost tyrannical grip on her audience's attention. Near the beginning she says no doubt we are wondering what is going to happen in the performance, 'and let me tell you, and let me tell YOU, and let me tell you now,' that she doesn't even know herself.

in Ljubljana titled *Pupilija, Papa Pupilo and the Pupilceks* which Janša has recently reconstructed. Together with *NOTES on a return*, these projects share a similar historiographical desire to deal with unfinished business. This is most evident I believe in Van Imschoot's *Crash Landings* project. All three projects also recognise the extent to which radical experimental performance can constitute an unofficial site of resistance against dominant ideologies – and this is a major concern of the reconstruction of *Pupilija, Papa Pupilo and the Pupilceks*. Questions about memories of ephemeral performances are inherent in all three projects, but these I suggest are foregrounded most clearly within *NOTES on a return*. Philosopher Maurice Halbwachs argued that recollection of memory is always a social process; in his view there is no individual memory that is not also, in some way, part of the memories that we share with those with whom we are connected. Performances like *Plato's Chair* that draw on those corporeal aspects of a radical tradition that are least amenable to preservation can nevertheless transmit communal memories, histories and values – that may be to some extent unofficial – from one generation or group to another. Through reflecting on the written and embodied memories of *Plato's Chair*, I want to consider what kinds of histories and values its recollection transmits.

Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) initially studied with the philosopher Henri Bergson but then in a radical change of focus joined the circle of researchers that formed around the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Towards the end of his life, Halbwachs's work on collective memory represents his attempt to reconcile Bergson's vitalist work on memory with Durkheim's objective, evidence-based approach to social research. In his 1939 essay on collective memory among musicians, Halbwachs uses a striking metaphor taken from the story of Robinson Crusoe. When Crusoe saw a footprint on the beach of his desert island, Halbwachs argues, this put him back in touch with the human world. Man Friday's footprint comprises a trace of the comings and goings of members of a group within which Crusoe recognised he belonged. Halbwachs then asks: what traces might comparably put a musician in touch with the world of music? His answer was the notes of a musical score. These, he believed, conjure up for musicians the memory, or ensemble of memories, of the social milieu of musical practices, and the conventions and obligations that are imposed on us when we engage with the

world of music. Thinking about memories of Live Art performances like those celebrated in *NOTES on a return* offers an opportunity to consider what traces might conjure up the ensemble of memories that circulate within the social milieu of Live Art.

Turning now to the story of my own encounter with *Plato's Chair*, I think I came to the Laing Art Gallery in 1985 primarily to see *Pandora's Box*, a feminist-oriented exhibition of work by women visual artists. Attending the lunchtime performance by Rose English was an added bonus. I believe it was only afterwards that I decided to write about it. English had a peripheral connection with *New Dance* magazine; she collaborated in the 1970s on a few projects with the choreographer Jacky Lansley, one of the magazine's founders. For the 1980 Women's Issue of *New Dance*, English wrote a feminist psychoanalytical analysis of fetishisation in Romantic ballet titled 'Alas alack: the representation of the ballerina'. Coincidentally, for the Newcastle performance of *Plato's Chair*, English wore a romantic-length ballet costume. Her performance was improvised around a core of pre-rehearsed material and at the time a similar approach to improvisation was key to much innovative dance practice in the UK.

Earlier this year, Rose English gave an artist's talk at De Montfort University, at which I introduced myself, mentioning that I'd once reviewed a piece of hers. This initiated a chain of events that culminated in Sophia Hao interviewing me about *Plato's Chair* as part of *NOTES on a return*. During the course of the interview I was surprised to find how much I could remember about the piece. This is perhaps less surprising when one takes into account the fact that I had made notes during the performance, checked over these immediately afterwards, and subsequently spent a couple of weeks working them up as a review.

If, as Henri Bergson believed, memory of the past is produced through recollection in the present, it can therefore take on a life of its own, and in doing so may incorporate partial misrecognitions and subjective rationalisations. Halbwachs reminds us of the social dynamics of this process. Our confidence in the accuracy of our recollections increases, he argues, 'if it can be supported by others' remembrances also. It is as if the very same

11/4/84 Laing Arts Valley Newre
Rose English, Plato's Chair
lunchtime breaking. small platform-
love corners

shoes hand movements-
Romantic leg in ballet costume
fan - spawnyk nurse

how very close to my heart the theme of his
afternoon's is. 15.

crying.

' Now let me tell you'
dedicated to the void.



all I am doing is being alive
and after doing that | sometimes.....

performer's body sacred vessel
is at once completely empty and is at once
now sometimes when I'm doing this

Bloody hands
Great actress was trying to give an impression of:

37 ~~old~~ people

Plato's chair story:-

knocking over glass
big bed dream going along river. boat life good
scaled up immense river. City many bridges
~~bridge~~ jelling up road. building

Broke in at night.
looking at the chair. What I was looking for was ^{was} a chair {let me tell you
let me tell you
let me tell you
now

hold up pictures of chair

Plato's chair

I stole the chair.

Sat in the chair woke up.
Dream of imp. change rest of my life
give up career as fire artist. and became a
philosopher

running to end and back. spirit.

experiences were relived by several persons instead of only one'.^[1] My own experience of recollecting *Plato's Chair* earlier this year fits with Halbwachs' description. I was more confident about what I was able to remember after I heard English's own lecture about the piece, and I was similarly reassured by the prompts of the interview. Photographs of English, in the ceramics gallery at the Laing, where the performance took place, show her wearing a ballet costume. This confirmed the description in my review as well as things that English recalled in her lecture. Some of the more impersonal traces, however, left me unmoved. When I revisited the now remodelled gallery space that used to display the ceramics collection, it was so changed that I found myself unable to recognise it as the site in which I had beheld the performance. I was also surprised when an extract from a video made of a performance of *Plato's Chair* in Vancouver also left me cold. While this is probably a generic problem with video documentation, the traces to which I responded most strongly were those that put me in touch with the perceptions and affective responses of others with whom I shared some knowledge or experience of the piece.

Halbwachs' idea, that the notes of a musical score constitute a privileged trace that puts the musician in touch with the world of music, is a problematic one for Live Art, because issues around approaches to documenting performances remain contentious. Halbwachs' idea nevertheless offers a way of reflecting on what is at stake in discussions about documentation. If, as he suggests, a score puts performers in touch with the collective memories of a community of fellow practitioners, then the breadth or narrowness of the range of entities and qualities that it can record will both enable and constrain the world view and inclusiveness of this community.

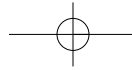
Some aspects of performance are inevitably more difficult to document than others. Diana Taylor offers some reflections on this in her discussion of the archive and the repertoire. In her account, the archive contains what are supposedly enduring kinds of material such as texts, documents, and visual images. The repertoire draws on those primarily non-verbal aspects of lived experience that are embodied in performance including 'gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short all those acts usually thought of as

ephemeral, non reproducible knowledge'.² What Taylor calls the repertoire therefore has the potential to offer alternative, sometimes unofficial ways of accessing cultural traditions that cannot usually be derived from the archive. Live Art practice, I suggest, draws more heavily on those aspects that Taylor associates with the repertoire than it does on those traces that can be stored in the more official archive.

Embodied memory, Taylor suggests, 'because it is live, exceeds the archive's ability to capture it. But that does not mean that performance – as ritualized, formalized, or reiterative behaviour – disappears'.³ Taylor is evidently responding here to Peggy Phelan's much cited argument that performance always disappears. It is possible to develop ways of identifying and writing about those effectively intangible aspects of performative behaviour that constitute the repertoire. This involves recognising and counteracting those processes that marginalise and invalidate non-verbal experience. Taylor argues that embodied acts 'reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next. Embodied and performed acts generate, record, and transmit knowledge'.⁴ My decision in 1985 to evaluate *Plato's Chair* as if it were a piece of dance meant that I focused in particular on those physicalised aspects of the performance that Taylor associates with the repertoire. This raises the question: what kinds of communal memories, histories, and values are being transmitted through recollection of such aspects today?

Back in 1985, I saw *Plato's Chair* through the lens of feminist cultural theory. As I understood it, the premise behind the exhibition *Pandora's Box* was to present work by women artists that re-appropriated European myths like that of Pandora in order to rework them in ways that counteracted their patriarchal bias. *Plato's Chair*, I thought, attempted something similar. In my review I wrote:

Plato proposed that objects in this world were corrupted versions of ideal models that existed on another dimension. This concept for English becomes a metaphor for performing. *Plato's Chair* in Newcastle was a partial version of an ideal that only exists fully



in her imagination, and its ‘corruption’ comes from her responsiveness to the specific context in which she is performing, and the way the audience behaves and reacts. [I was referring here to its improvised nature] On another level her representations of woman – as romantic ballerina or melodramatic actress – are corrupted versions of another sort of ‘ideal’, an oppressive social construct [i.e. a patriarchal one], which it is English’s achievement that she manages to expose in such an entertaining way.⁵

In retrospect, I can see problems with this interpretation. Admittedly during the performance English stated that she wanted to give up being a fine art entertainer and become a philosopher; but in her talk at De Montfort earlier this year she claimed that she had in fact hardly read any philosophy. One can still interpret the performance in the way I suggested, but I should not infer that English intended in her performance to present a philosophical argument. Retrospectively, the particular feminist approach to representation that I then believed informed the piece should now perhaps also be reconsidered. To expose an oppressive social construct is in effect a negative, deconstructive intervention. *Plato’s Chair*, I suggest, did something that was, in effect, more affirmative. Through reflecting on my memories, I now realise I can see the 1985 performance as a celebration of an immanent creative potential within the tradition of female performing artists – ballerinas, melodramatic actresses - whose contributions have been largely marginalised and undervalued. A recognition of a potential that is inherent within this particular, marginalised group does not, however, preclude the possibility of recognising a creative potential immanent within other less marginalised individuals or groups, of people or horses.

Works that recognise such immanent potentials can be socially transformative by enabling a belief in what might otherwise seem impossible. What I am suggesting here is that what is officially possible is generally confined to what can be stored in the archive, while to conceive of the impossible one has to draw on the kinds of qualities and experiences that are remembered and maintained within the repertoire. Earlier in this presentation I suggested that *NOTES on a return* offers an opportunity to consider what traces might conjure up the ensemble of memories that circulate within the social milieu of Live Art. From my experience of recollecting memories of *Plato’s Chair*, I

can say that such traces would be redolent of the sedimentation of collective memories of a group who share a belief in the impossible. In order to believe in the impossible it is necessary to keep open a range of possibilities that lie beyond the set of normative performative practices whose habitual reiteration maintains isolated, passive patterns of cultural consumption. Memory, I have been arguing, plays an important role in keeping these possibilities open. In conclusion, one thing that *NOTES on a return* has surely revealed is the strength and richness of the memories that connect us with those with whom we share some involvement with the milieu of Live Art, and that these can be recollected in greater depth and from a more distant period than we had previously appreciated.



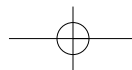
¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, translated Francis J. Ditter, Jr., and Vida Yazdi Ditter, New York: Harper & Row, 1980, p. 22.

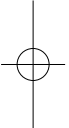
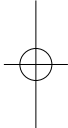
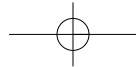
² Diana Taylor *The archive and the repertoire: cultural memory and performance in the Americas*, Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 2003, p. 20.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

⁵ Ramsay Burt ‘Rose English, Plato’s Chair’ *New Dance*, No. 34, Autumn 1985, p. 26.





Artist's Notes

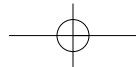
Rose English

Nigel Rolfe

Bruce McLean

Mona Hatom

Anne Bean





Artist's Notes
Rose English

I opened the door of the museum and I stepped inside ... I knew that in this museum there was an object waiting just for me. So I walked down the museum, I didn't look at the catalogues, I didn't browse through the postcards first, no, I just kept walking to the very end of the museum and there I came across a chair. When I saw this chair I knew that it was for me. On this chair were the words 'Plato's Chair' and so I stole it. I stole the chair and I took it home. I took this chair home and I placed it in my room and I sat in it and I knew that the chair and the dream were some sort of celestial sign, it was some sort of indication that I had to give up my career as a comedian, frankly floundering, and become a philosopher. This wasn't quite what I had in mind for my life, but because I'd got a few gigs lined up I thought I'd sort of weld the two together and that is what I have been trying to do tonight.

(Rose English. *Plato's Chair* transcript, 1984)

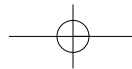
Imogen Grave: For what reason do we keep the souvenir, the aide memoire? after all evidence is no guarantee of remembering or being remembered ...

Espiritu la Verdad: Unless its noticed! This is the permanence of the ephemeral. This is the ephemera of permanence. The moment has no monument ...

(Rose English. *Tantamount Esperance*, 1994)

When Sophia Yadong Hao first contacted me about *NOTES on a return* my initial response was interest – with an underlying doubt. I resisted her premise that there was no documentation of the performances presented in the 1980s at the Laing.

I kept telling her that I do have an extensive archive including video, audio and photographic documentation of Plato's Chair. I kept trying to draw Sophia's attention to this material – to open this evidence to her – but she resisted back, tactfully.



Rose English

Rose English

I came to understand that Sophia wanted to prioritise physiological memory and the role of the witness of ephemeral works above the evidence remaining as documentation in either institutional or artists' archives. This could so easily have become a form of esoteric performance forensics, but instead I started to feel a strong sense of solidarity towards a project that 'places an emphasis on the notion of equal ownership shared between artist and viewer'. As artists, the integrity of Sophia's enquiry impressed us. We recognised the clear experimental parameters that she was creating to explore the duration of the ephemeral, and we agreed to follow the three distinct stages of her project over a period of six months.

Privately, however, I still believed that the final stage – a brief to be given to the commissioned artists to make new works in response to the audio recollections was an impossible task! So, six months later, I was unprepared for the forceful shock of recognition I experienced in seeing Viola Yesiltac's installation, *Adding Salt to the Sea*, which was based on listening to the audio recordings of artist and audience members recalling *Plato's Chair*. This visceral response I myself had was, I remembered, something that I had read in reviews about my own work of the 1980s which 'left behind a dumbstruck audience thrown to the edge of some complex insight.' (Tony Whitfield. Fuse, Canada. 1981 Adventure or Revenge). I found myself in turn dumbstruck, moved to tears and thrown to the edge of some complex insight – but of what?

Was it the shock of the accuracy of the 'residue' of the performance of *Plato's Chair* that Viola had created? Was it a sense of what it might have been like for someone to have witnessed *Plato's Chair* 25 years ago and a reminder of how powerful that experience may have been? Or was it an unexpected affirmation of an ephemeral practice – of the enduring potency of ideas rendered as tangible and palpably material in the present fired from a synapse between artists through a physiological memory trace recalling the 'original' work? Not re-interpreted, not re-enacted – but the imprint, the cell memory of the idea alive with its own innate integrity.

What was even more extraordinary to me was to learn that Viola made her work entirely from listening repeatedly to the audio recollections of *Plato's Chair*. She had resisted widening her researches by deciding not to talk with me, to read transcriptions, or watch a DVD of *Plato's Chair*. It seems that Viola also decided to follow Sophia's premise to work only with physiological memory and her decision impressed me. By following the rigorous parameters of Sophia's enquiry *NOTES on a return* and Viola's installation revealed to me clear evidence of the enduring materiality of ideas – when they are noticed!

ROSE ENGLISH'S RECOLLECTION OF PLATO'S CHAIR

On 20 February 2009, Sophia Y. Hao interviewed Rose English at the Laing Art Gallery. The following is an extract from the transcript of the interview.

Between 1983 and 1985, I had been performing *Plato's Chair* in a number of places in Canada and also in the UK, and the one at the Laing was the very last manifestation of it so it was very special from that point of view.

The title came to me in a dream. And the dream formed part of the performance. And the dream is something I disclosed or told the audience at the very end of the performance – after about an hour and a half. The dream was of a journey I made towards a building, a 'museum'; I broke into it and I made my way through the museum, pulled towards something, it was a chair, a very plain chair. It was a chair a bit like the chair in this picture. And on the chair in my dream there was a small notice and it said '*Plato's Chair*'. In my dream I stole this chair, out of the museum, and I took it home (laughs).

Part of making *Plato's Chair* was going ... the adventure of just turning up. I sort of really enjoyed that at the time, that sort of flexibility, that sort of thinking in the moment, because it contrasted with other work that I had made that was very carefully prepared and very painstakingly prepared and *Plato's Chair* was made in a very different spirit. So part of it was just the adventure of accidental discovery and being in the moment. Each time

I made *Plato's Chair*, I always made something special around the space and so I believe I would have referred a lot to those glass cabinets and the objects in them as objects whose mysterious and palpable presence was informing what I said.

I think the fact of it being a museum ... and it was the first time I had performed *Plato's Chair* in a museum, I felt it had come full circle from its origin in a strange sort of way. The space itself was extremely exciting to me. It was a long, long, high-ceilinged gallery space, it had a barreled ceiling. It had an extraordinary stillness and quietness about it, I remember that I placed myself predominately at one end of the gallery and the people who came to see the performance were sitting facing me on chairs. I placed one chair in front of them, this ubiquitous '*Plato's Chair*' that was always just one of the chairs that the building had, so there were many *Plato's Chairs*.

When I was making those very minimal solo performances, they always started life with a set of questions ... you know (laughs), really big questions! Every time I made that performance it was attempting to answer those questions and sometimes, while I was performing it, the answers would come to me

fleetingly and for a second, and instantly be forgotten. *Plato's Chair* and the performance immediately before it – the very first improvised solo performance I made was called *Adventure or Revenge* – both those performances were incredibly exhilarating to perform because it was very clear to me that I'd arrived at a place where the performance itself was the thinking, it was both the question and the answer, and it was *the thing* (laughs), the thing itself.

One of the very first reasons why I wanted to start to make performance was it circumvented; it went around the whole problematic of the status of objects which I found really disturbing as a young artist. I found the way the things I made were mediated in the world very, very, very problematic; that they had this status of works of art. And I found that actually making these objects to then be placed inside an ephemeral work but had no life outside of the moment of it happening a really, really, really exciting way of circumventing that problematic status, a work of art. So when you ask me which one is the work of art, it also a very complex question to answer. But I would say that, I think the fragments or things that both precede the performance, come before it, things that remain afterwards are all really important fragments of that piece of

work, yes, they're potent fragments.

I think it's true that there were artists who believed that the work should not be documented but, you know what, I've yet to meet one of those artists. Perhaps it's apocryphal, this story. Who are these artists who never have their work documented? Who are they, where are they? We've always heard about this but I've just for the first time asked this question. In relation to my own documentation, I find it important ... I find it important to have those palpable traces of my practice. They are important to me, yes. I think like everything, it's how it's mediated and presented, those fragments or evidence of the ephemeral practice, I think it can, like everything, seem incredibly dull and dead or very vibrant and thrilling and of the moment as well. I think it's how it's presented or how it's viewed or how it's seen or where it's placed, how it's accessed. But I think, live art or performance art has always had an uncomfortable and ambiguous status inside the wider conventions of the art world. I don't know really why that is, but I certainly know that in relation to my own practice, observing and noticing that as a result of being an artist who *had* performed in galleries.



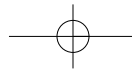
Artist's Notes
Nigel Rolfe

The Rope and other strong works from the past remain active and are a foundation but part of current practice. Journeys made that still resonate and form the basis of going forward now. Although a long time ago, lessons learned and the experience had in their activation, if meaningful, remain relevant.

I have never yet committed significant past works to memory and made them over or past or beyond reach somehow. It is as if they become thoughts alone they are no longer practical or physical. This entropy of all things made and touched and felt is very central to my life and working as an artist. I don't embrace retrospection easily as all is looking forward.

An intriguing idea that those who witness a live work as an audience then, can contribute to a project and exhibition about it now. The unique window that they shared, called on and put forward as an audio diary of observations and images summoned up. Memory of course is fickle however, and often fails and invents its own version of things. Somewhat more problematic is the possibility that those initial works can make a good contribution to young artists works made now in response, especially considering that their only view is founded on the second-hand. They do what they do and however strong and interesting in their own right the linkage with our history and past is opaque and unclear as a useful basis.

Some images become iconic and these are somewhat rare in temporary moving live pictures across time. *The Rope* has this possibility. It is a foolish and even stupid image rendering man as idiot and fool but at one and the same time iconic and also recognisable as universally shared from within our experience, but yet we have never actually done this. Perhaps we know how it is to be smothered and trapped without breath or sight or balance. It is a mask and a shroud, to face outside but hide inside. It is medieval and dips into other times. Above all it is a vehicle towards questions of place and culture, as specific artefact from a dark and uncertain geopolitical place and time put to reuse for an action to summon up metaphors of absence and loss.



NIGEL ROLFE'S RECOLLECTIONS OF *THE ROPE*

On 26 March 2009, Sophia Y. Hao interviewed Nigel Rolfe at the Laing Art Gallery. The following is an extract from the transcript of the interview.

The Rope That Binds Us Makes Them Free is its full title. The title comes from an actual description of the object used in the work and it's a ball of twine found in a community, an impoverished community, to the west of Ireland, in County Leitrim, and it comes from a derelict cottage there. It's a ball of sisal twine about 15 inches, 16 inches across where a long gathering of loose ends of twine has been wound into a ball and it's made of all the short lengths from harvest that weren't used, covered in creosote as a preservative – so very organic, very indigenously ethnic and the longer title is a kind of allusion to the 'us' talking about the 'others', to this particular culture, referring to my 'Britishness' in the face of Irish history.

I do remember certain things about certain places, about it [*The Rope*], but pretty much this qualification of it as an ongoing piece which somehow I still think its trajectory has not ended yet.

People watch you and they just cannot believe you're doing that, that you're stupid enough. One, that it's going to do what they think it's going to do and then you get over a threshold where their disbelief becomes absolute – you are actually doing it. It becomes a promise, then it becomes a reality, then

it becomes an image and it's got all those things. Usually it's the build-up stage by stage, but by the end, they're left with a really strong image. And that's what you're trying to achieve by this process, this kind of ritualized process.

I never blacked-out but I nearly did. The only air that's in there is in there – it doesn't filter much through. I don't talk about this often, you can't hear by the end of it. You certainly can't see at all and then, you can't breathe much, so you've lost all your faculties and a lot of it, from a good part in there, is just holding on. You're really trying to hold on to something and it's hard, it's very, very hard. You're hot, you've lost your balance, so the chair becomes imperative, I remember a lot about that having two feet on the ground and reassuring myself, between the two feet and your arse, that you're there. And the end of it is me putting my hands on my knees. I put both my hands on my knees. My signal to myself that I'm finished after this long process, my kind of reward to myself, like a little treasure, was that when I've done this, I'm going to put my hands on my knees. And that still remains, you know, if I'm watching sport or something, the moment I put my hands on my knees, it's like, yes, you know something has happened for you in this sequence.

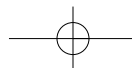
I think a lot of those things are the really serious kind of professional, practical, questions about making live work. You know: How long is enough; how do you find emphasis; when is it pseudo or false; when is it real? Do you really do this? Can't be too quick, can't be too slow.

I've never put it [the rope] on and taken it off. Mainly because I don't think you could expect that of them [the audience] – the anti-climax of the withdrawal of it would have been nowhere near as interesting as getting to the point where you see the complete image. Also, I don't think I want them [the audience] there when I come out because I'm in the most vulnerable, pretty unpleasant [place]. It leaves an etching on you that lasts maybe two or three hours. All the markings from it are really bound into your head ... I didn't used to like to see again or wouldn't drink or anything, like take a glass of water for a good while afterwards. There'd be a long period of trying to come to terms with being alive again. It's quite a cathartic thing. So the taking off is really important. You can't just whip it off and let it go because you lose the connection of it.

You can hear the breathing and you can hear the unwinding, you can hear the chair a lot and all those sounds.

There are two schools of thought under electronic technology: you either wipe it out so it's clean or you endorse it so it's real and *The Rope* is very real. It has a default and the default is good, sonically, I like those things. There's no music, there's no soundtrack really. It can be done absolutely without timing or a metronome, or a click track and it does certain things while you're doing it. The audience starts to breathe for it. So you can hear that breath and various cities you do it in you pick up the vibe of the city.

And it's [a] tough piece of work. Anybody slightly wobbly in the audience can't take it. If they have a condition where they become affected by claustrophobia – it's incredibly claustrophobic the piece ... People inhabit it by witnessing it. The kind of bigger issues philosophically, about how metaphor works or how we take things and why you use certain things become very important. It's not what it looks like, it's what lies underneath. It's not about a kind of return in terms of profit or loss account of value; it's human relations, and human relations and relationship to breath.



WITNESS RECOLLECTIONS OF *THE ROPE*

Between January and March 2009, Sophia Y. Hao interviewed Mike Collier (MC), Stephen Collins (SC), Paul Holloway (PH), Alison Lloyd (AL), and Grainne Sweeney (GS). The following is an extract from the transcripts of the interviews.

AL: Nigel Rolfe, I think, may well have already been sat on the chair with the light. I think he was sat in the chair with the rope, with his roped head, so this enormous head – rope head – and people came in and sat down. And then he sat there and, unwrapped. He was leaning forward and slowly unwrapped the rope and made another ball in his hand, as he did that. It definitely felt like it was all about being a long durational piece, that it took quite a long time. I don't remember being bored by it. Everyone that had come was totally loyal and committed to wanting to see performance art so we were all absolutely dedicated to sitting there for as long as it took. It was almost like watching a meditation.

SC: Nigel entered the space, sat down, picked up a large ball of twine and I remember the very first action, unravelling a length, and the most powerful thing I remember at the time was the consideration, the thoughts that were obviously going through his mind at the time. He was feeling the weight of the rope, he was feeling the loosened end in one hand, and you could sense the impending aspect of what was to take place. And he bit, and held the end of the rope between his teeth, and started to wrap the rope around his head – It's very quiet,

there is just Nigel and this chair and this rope.

So as he started to bind his head and the audience became more aware of the large ball of rope twine that it came from and what was about to happen, there was a certain electricity – there was a tension – and Nigel sensed this, and Nigel in a way created his own physical communication. Nigel got so far with the binding. He was aware of the need to breathe but not, I don't think, immediately and had to re-bind. And then he had to re-adjust and it was obvious that the physicality of it all was quite demanding and that raised the tension within the audience, but it continued and it continued, and it continued.

GS: I can't remember why I went. I might have been at a loose end. But I remember walking into the room and I remember the set-up. I'm pretty sure it was packed and I remember it being quite dark and Nigel sitting on the chair at the front, and then it was very quiet. And I hadn't got a clue what was going to happen. So he's sitting there with this big ball of string and, he starts to wrap it around his head and I can remember thinking, what on earth is going on here? The more he did it the more claustrophobic I started to feel and thinking back, I really

probably wanted to get up and leave. I can't even remember how long it went on for but I just couldn't believe that he was going to wrap his head with this ball of string. It felt like a really, really long period of time sitting there and [It] really did affect me quite physically ... you know, when you get that knot in your stomach?

I think that must have been when I started to feel very claustrophobic; it was when he was doing that and the more it was building up and building up and building up, I was just, you know, in a way kind of, rooted to my seat, unable to move, I probably would have wanted to get up and walk out but that would have been really difficult because it was incredibly quiet. Nobody was saying anything it was just silence. I don't remember being aware of the rest of the audience at all, really, apart from going in and sitting down and being part of an audience.

In my twenty-three years now of actually looking and experiencing contemporary art – you see a lot, but there are very few pieces that you can recall with any detail or that actually have a physical [impact], that you respond physically to, and this is one for me that I really do remember. I can close my eyes and I can walk into the space and I can sit down and I can still

feel the way I felt on that day. I wasn't really concerned or thinking about why he did it, just that what he did had an affect on me that I will never forget.

PH: He was sat holding this large ball and, he puts one end between his teeth and you kind of think, well he could do anything, couldn't he? I mean, you know. He could kick it round the room; he could unravel it and measure something or whatever. But, no, he wraps one piece round his head and you think ok, fair enough, but then he keeps going in a very measured way. It wasn't a quick kind of loop, loop, loop. It was actually sort of fitting it around and above his ears, across the top of his head, under his chin, making adjustments I guess so that he could still breathe through his nose and his head got heavier and heavier so it obviously sagged, you know, towards the end. He was sort of bowed because of, I think, the weight of this thing. I couldn't tell you exactly how long it took but it took a considerable amount of time and we sat there in the dark, in the heat, and watched him slowly turn his head into this great ball of hemp and basically suffocate himself in this rope. I remember his hands when he was kind of feeding this rope round his head, and I remember towards the end his hands were shaking slightly and you could sense that sort of tension.

I do remember subsequently telling people, and when you try and describe it, it sounds trivial. Somebody takes a piece of rope then wraps their head in it. So actually you gave up trying to describe it, because in that act it does sound trivial, but when you were there it was horrible, you know, it was meant to be. It was claustrophobic, it was uncomfortable and it was threatening in a way. And I did remember we were actually really concerned for him and were concerned to get it unwrapped afterwards, to get it off him as quickly as possible because that he was going to pass out ... it's only afterwards, you rationalise then, why are they putting themselves through this, what is their point, why are they doing it?

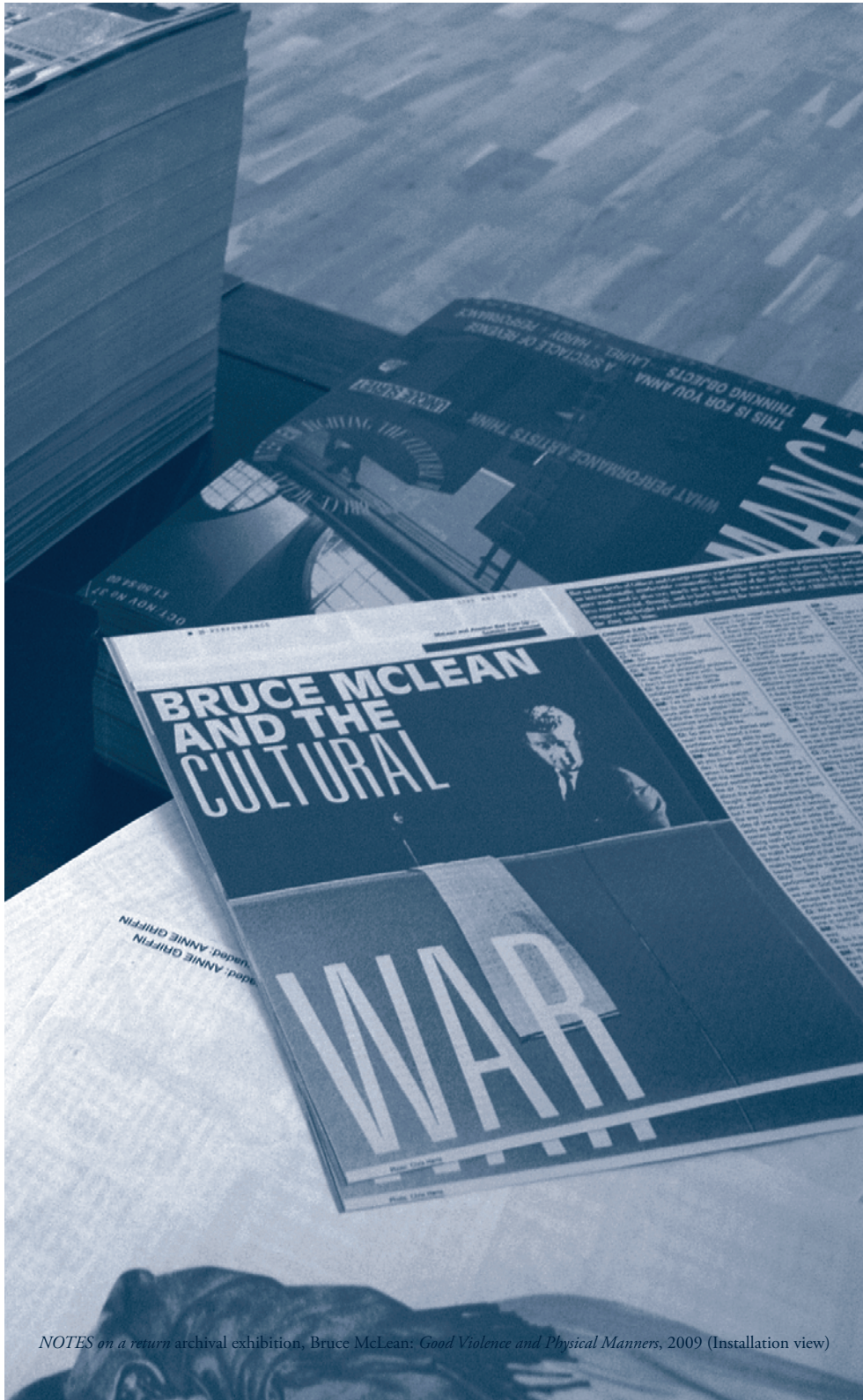
MC: I remember there's something about the rope – and maybe I'm over romanticising about it – but the texture of the rope and the smell of the rope, I have a memory of that. I also have a memory of it being covered or coated with something and I'm not sure about that. So that sense of history, about it being [an] individual's family's history was there as well.

It was a time-limited piece and there was a kind of genuine real edge to the piece as well. That was where the physicality [was], it wasn't about him, you know, kind of huffing and puffing and doing all sorts of mad things with his body or cutting himself, or anything, it was a very silent sense of edginess that was there.

The most interesting thing for me is I don't think that bit of it was terribly important, because what followed with Nigel winding the rope around his head, just as a visual image was so obviously and clearly working on a number of different levels. And yet within a very specific context you could understand, that – like the best of art work – it became much more than the sum of its parts. It was more than just a simple explanation, or a complex explanation, about what the troubles were about. It was also very human, it was very personal; it was a personal response that had real sense of history.

Now I have a memory also of there being a metronome ticking away in the background. Maybe I've just made that up, I don't know, but I do remember it quite clearly, sort of 'tick, tick, tick', ticking away and that added to the tension of the piece. And then it ends very quickly when he gets to a certain point and he has to go off and you're just left with the chair there, and, again, you've got that.





NOTES on a return archival exhibition, Bruce McLean: *Good Violence and Physical Manners*, 2009 (Installation view)

RECOLLECTIONS OF GOOD VIOLENCE AND PHYSICAL MANNERS

The edited transcript below is taken from a series of interviews carried out by Sophia Y. Hao with Bruce McLean (BM) on 6 February 2009, and with Mike Collier (MC), Stephen Collins (SC) and Paul Holloway (PH) between January and March 2009.

BM: I made a performance at the Tate in 1985, and also at Riverside Studio's, two versions of the same piece called *Good Manners and Physical Violence*. But I changed it for the piece at the Laing to *Good Violence and Physical Manners*. It was to do with the kind of behaviour that people were adopting, coming from this kind of Thatcherite regime, kind of like being quite snotty and quite badly behaved. This was common in that day; people observing one another, behaving differently to one another, and orderly and just trying to deal with social behaviour in this kind of blue box which looked like a big Thatcherite lump of stuff. Anyway, so the piece that I did at the Laing was kind of a development from that.

SC: The performances were mad, completely and utterly mad. Bruce, the energy of Bruce, of how he worked with David was phenomenal. The energy that Bruce could create ultimately, I think, stems a lot from his political beliefs. His works were charged. We're talking about '86, we've got Thatcher, the vitriol, there are things that come to mind about Bruce's performance whether it's *Good Violence and Physical Manners* or whether it's from another similar type [of] performance. I remember the

phrase 'Margaret Thatcher and a heavily directed hairdo', a repetitive action or a repetitive phrase coming through. Bruce worked with tape loops and phrases were taken, he would record a phrase and retell it and replay it, and replay it and he'd rewind it, and it would be in reverse and it would be scratched and there are impressions, and they do meld, they do merge, so trying to remember the space sets a tone.

BM: I remember a lot of ringing and radios and trying to make as much noise as possible. I don't remember it being fantastically loud just being irritatingly noisy, rather than terribly loud. I have a feeling we didn't do any talking, we didn't because it was too busy doing this [makes sound of phone ringing, crashes and whistling] and things going [whistles] and interference and things like that, it's mainly to do with interference and not being able to communicate to somebody because of the noise.

MC: There was a kind of organised chaos I remember going on in the space. I remember the interaction being a silent one not a verbal one, and being done through, almost like, semaphore ... communicating silently between each other within the kind of

cacophony of noise that's going on suggests that it's about the way that these individuals communicate within an environment which is very difficult to navigate [and] negotiate.

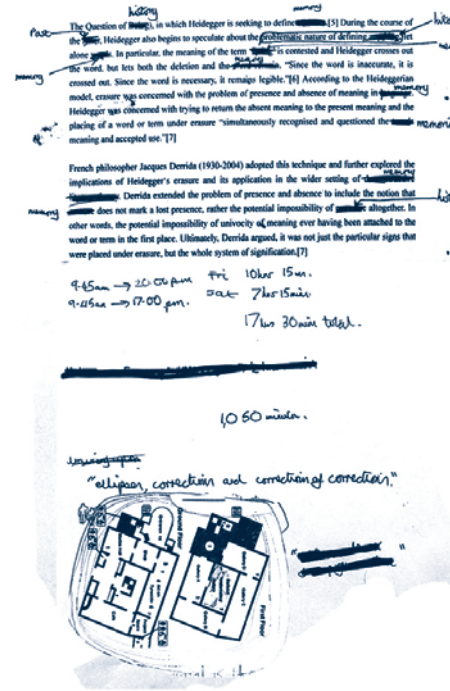
PH: It was grandiose. There was this sort of dark lighting because they'd just lit the tables. I just remember there was lots and lots of movement and there were telephones going off. He kept answering the phone from different people and moving up and down and there was all sorts of "Look I'm busy, yeah sorry, no ... Can you catch me later?". There was a comic effect and a ripple to that. It got more and more exciting and things were happening and being sent and received and there was a sort of ... see I'm getting quite excited just talking about it, it was kind of infectious. There was a feel almost like air traffic control ... it felt like he wanted to achieve something – or he and David – but they were constantly interrupted and frustrated and there were other presses coming in and that actually there was a sort of spiralling out of control of something.

BM: I used to work with Joan Jonas, and she used to keep phoning me up in Berlin, she'd say, [adopts accent] "Oh hello Bruce, how are you today?", "Oh I'm ok Joan", "Oh really, I'm a little depressed", "Are you really depressed Joan?", "Yeah I really ...", "Well I'm a little depressed as well", "Oh really, well I feel better knowing that you're

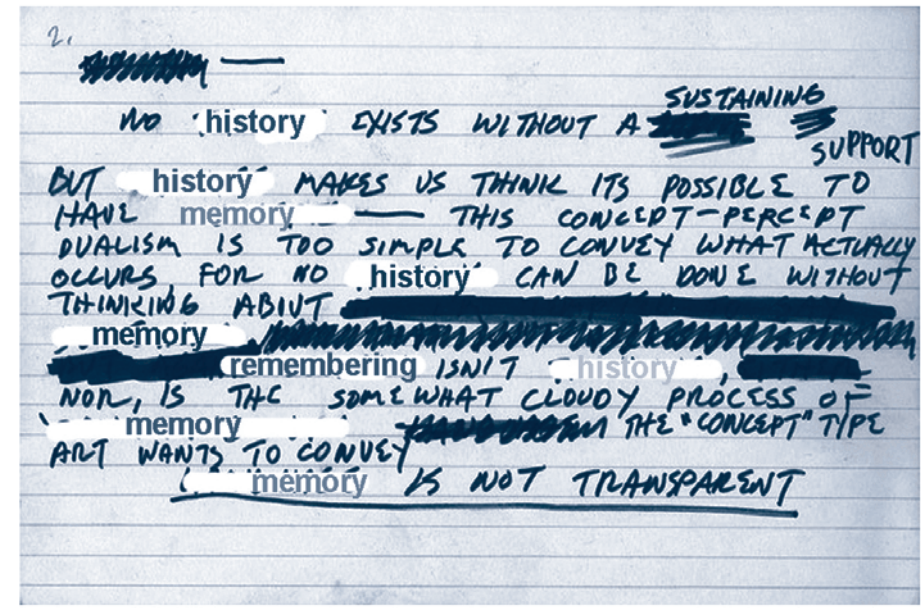
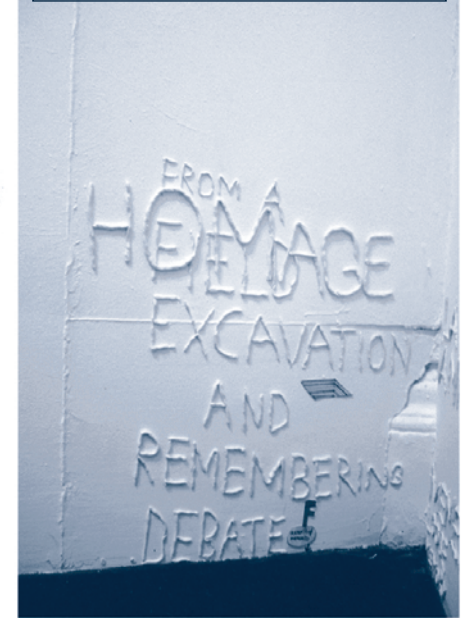
depressed". She did this quite a lot and we kept on thinking we might make a kind of performance piece together using the phone like that, but we never did it. But anyway, during this performance, she phoned my wife up in London about something and my wife said, "Oh he's not here, he's in Newcastle at the Laing gallery making a performance" so she phoned up! And I pick one phone up and the voice is her going, "Oh hello, Joan here!" That's true! I said, "Joan? Joan Jonas? What are you doing here? Are you depressed?" and she'd said, "Oh no, no. Are you depressed?" I said, "I'm just making a work at the moment" ... Nobody knew in the audience.

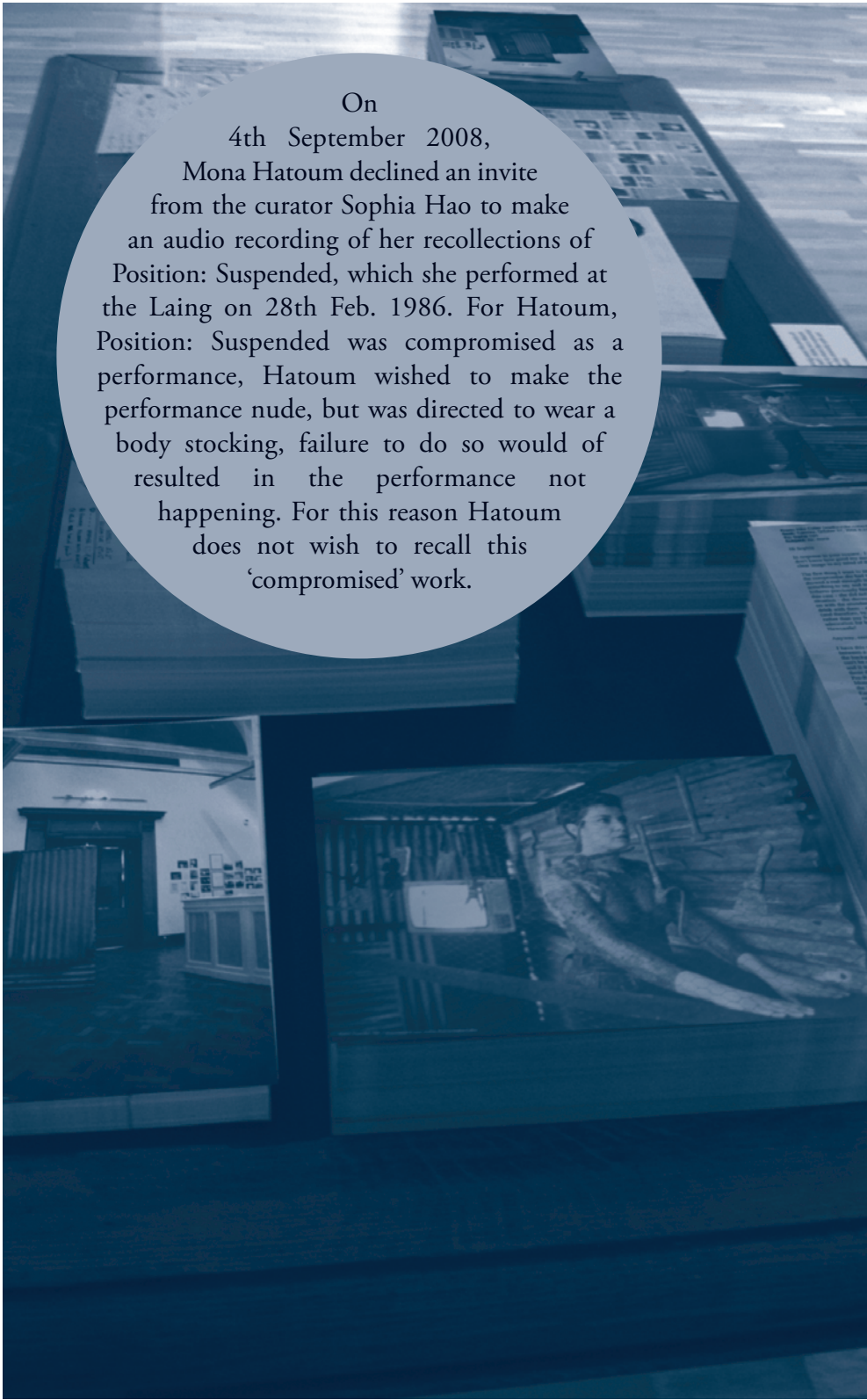
SC: I remember a phone ringing, it may not have happened ... there were phones there or one was given the impression ... or whether the phone was audio track? Another layer.

BM: A lot of people don't actually believe this but I've never ever, organised a photographer, to come along, "Oh, I'm making a performance tonight at 2.30 will you come along and document it?". I've never ever done that because that's not the name of the game. Dirk Buwalda came to photograph the stuff at the Tate because he knew I was doing it. He wanted to come and photograph me working and doing that, to make photographs for himself really. I think that a lot of documentation has become the work, not as far as I'm



Notes on NOTES: Writers in Residence John Dummett





On
4th September 2008,
Mona Hatoum declined an invite
from the curator Sophia Hao to make
an audio recording of her recollections of
Position: Suspended, which she performed at
the Laing on 28th Feb. 1986. For Hatoum,
Position: Suspended was compromised as a
performance, Hatoum wished to make the
performance nude, but was directed to wear a
body stocking, failure to do so would of
resulted in the performance not
happening. For this reason Hatoum
does not wish to recall this
'compromised' work.

From: Mike Collier [mailto:mike.collier@sunderland.ac.uk]
Sent: Tuesday, October 07, 2008 8:27 AM
To: Sophia Hao
Subject: Re: mona

Hi Sophia

In response to your request, I have been thinking of Mona's work - it was so long ago and I don't know how good my memory is (although, interestingly for your project I do have a clear image in my mind of the piece in the gallery)

The first thing I want to say is that, whilst I can fully understand Mona's anger at the compromise she had to make, I DO feel that, rather than representing a weakness, this showed a real strength in Mona's character and approach to work. At the time, artists had something to say and wanted to get their voice across to a larger and wider audience than had hitherto previously been the case. I was so impressed with the lack of ego Mona showed in this case - she did not behave like a prima-dona - but really did try to engage with the situation - she showed a great deal of dignity, I think. I was also struck at how well she got on with the attendants - some artists treated them with scant regard, but she went out for a drink with them - she talked with them - not at them - and they really liked and respected her (and therefore, by association, her work) - she really did communicate to a broad audience rather than pay lip service to that ideal. I had liked Mona's work before this event, but, my admiration for her, and my respect for her, increased considerably after New Work Newcastle!

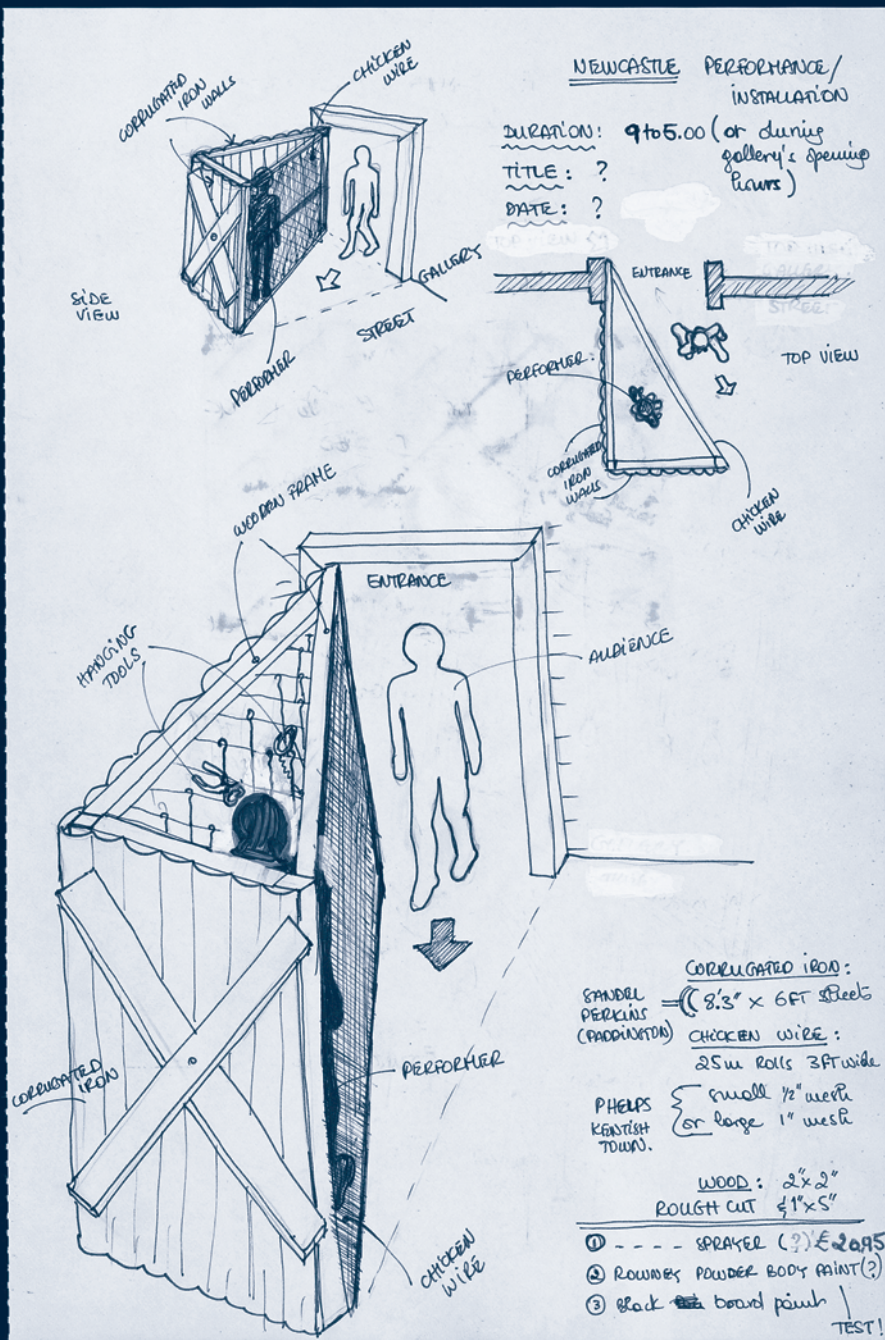
Anyway, enough of that. So..... to Mona's work itself.

I have this memory of her prowling around a cage in the corner of the gallery, smeared in mud, between a series of sharp 'instruments' with a TV playing banal daytime TV programmes in the background - for some reason I have it in my mind that it was Neighbours on a loop - but I can't be sure!! I thought this was a terrifically strong piece (not withstanding the body stocking) - and it was a shocking thing for visitors to the Laing to witness - and it made them think - in those days the bulk of the Laing's visitors would have been expecting a rather cosy display of Pre-Raphaelite paintings that massaged their cultural appetite. When the audience read that Mona was Lebanese, (I can't remember how this information was transmitted - was it through the leaflet or by a text on the wall?) - and given all the trouble that was going on in the Middle East then, this 'prowling' of Mona's took on a darkly dangerous overtone - there was, to me any rate, a clear narrative here - the sense of an individual caught up (against their will) within a conflict they were powerless to influence etc.... and the contrast between the West's (who were clearly involved, politically, in the war in the Middle East for reasons of power, wealth and corruption) denial of the truth (represented by the banality of the cultural response (day-time TV which played everyday whilst atrocities occurred around the world)). However, (and this was the thing about all good performance art then - Nigel Rolfe's piece was a shining example as well), there was so much more to Mona's work than just the straight narrative - it was a visually compelling work that had visitors coming back - they were 'hypnotised' by the the performance - it clearly conveyed an element of humanity that went beneath the merely literal - it moved (and unsettled and disturbed) the audience - I like to think that it made them reflect more deeply on the human condition - and I don't think you can ask much more from a piece of work.

I am sorry if this is a little rushed - it is very busy here at the moment - if you want any more - I will be happy to oblige, time permitting.

If you do talk to Mona again, she probably doesn't remember me, but please pass my best wishes to her.

All the best,
Mike



100 Mona Hatoum, preparatory sketch for *Position: Suspended*, 1986

WITNESSES' RECOLLECTIONS OF POSITION: SUSPENDED

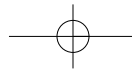
Between January and March 2009, Sophia Y. Hao interviewed Mike Collier (MC), Stephen Collins (SC), Paul Holloway (PH) and Alison Lloyd (AL). The following is an extract from the transcripts of the interviews.

SC: It was in February, and it was particularly cold. I remember the significance of that because the nature of Mona's work and her proposal required an aspect of nudity which in itself was controversial and caused quite a few problems for the organisers at the time. Mona's performance was in a very tight and restrictive cage. It was a large gallery without any great heating, and the one thing that comes back more and more than anything is actually how cold she was.

The gallery itself was not lit particularly and the Laing was a very different place to how it is now; it was steeped in its history of municipal gallery. There was a drabness. I remember entering this space, the darkness and the performance itself with a TV monitor in the corner of this cage, monochromatic images and white noise being interspersed with actions: Mona hitting objects, sharp objects, blades, placing herself in what appeared [to be] quite considerable danger. It was a very, very powerful piece for that reason. If I remember correctly, and whether correctly is relevant or not, my memories are that the space and the cage was in a triangular configuration, and the triangle itself formed a point which Mona would move towards, force herself, restricted, into the corner.

Timber, corrugated iron and chicken wire, mud, darkness, rust, rusty blades, white noise on the monitor screen, Mona herself smeared with the mud, a very organic, very earthy, very dark piece. And it was a durational piece. I think that's significant that the durational aspect is not necessarily always recognised, and the members of the audience had opportunity to come and go as they pleased. And if they liked, they could return later, several hours later and witness Mona in the same situation. This was a considered, metered, and measured act and it threw up a whole host of questions about the physical state, about confinement, about repression, about boundaries. I talked with Mona before and after the piece, probably more before than after purely because immediately after the piece Mona was quite exhausted. My discussions before the performance were centred around the ideas of representation, the record, the document. Not all artists are generally specific about their requirements but Mona did have some ideas. We did talk about the images and the image-making, and there were specifics, but the specifics – it's amazing – I can't remember the specifics now.

MC: I remember Mona's piece being set in the corner of Gallery A – that's



my memory of it – and there was a large chicken wire, kind of shack built across the corner of the gallery. Suspended within this were some very sharp instruments that were genuinely sharp – they didn't just look sharp, they were sharp – and Mona was dressed in a ... Mona should have been naked and covered in mud but for reasons of respectability, as far as Tyne & Wear Museums were concerned, they actually made her wear a body stocking. However, I still do remember the piece for its visual impact and not for the body stocking. Mona prowled around in that cage with the television – now I have in my memory that the television played Neighbours on a continuous loop and she did that all day. She was in the space with other things as I recall, and I think that sense of it being just simply a part of coming to it was actually also quite important. It wasn't isolated and set aside dramatically as the event on its own, but it was very much a part of everything else that was happening and you came upon it and suddenly became engrossed in it, and a part of it, and I think that actually helped it rather than hindered it.

Mona's piece was an installation rather than a performance so what I do remember is the people would come back and back to see her, so it was a piece that was revisited by an audience, not a piece that they would come [and] look at and go away and then forget about. But they wanted to come back

and see it, so from that point of view there was a kind of obsessive mesmerising element to it as well.

PH: I remember, there was a whole sort of story about haircuts and I remember she got her hair cut particularly for the ... maybe for the performance, she went from one extreme to the other sort of thing and it was noticeable. I think I must have commented on it and she insisted that I should go and get a haircut too then and told me which hairdressers to go to, and this kind of stuff. And I did, I said, "Right, oh" and I went and got my haircut. Which I guess tells you something about the sociable nature of the relationship, it wasn't the cold [type], it wasn't just a sort of turn up and do; it was a personal thing. And it was that little human interaction thing with somebody that stuck.

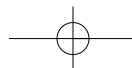
It was a small, tiny, space, and she had hammers and machetes and knives, and all sorts of implements hanging from the ceiling, as it were, of this tiny space which she crawled into; then she spent the time just slowly moving around inside and these objects would sort of bump into her face, knock her shoulders, scratch her back. She was covered in mud and which was slowly drying on her body... the fact that she may or may not have been clothed was absolutely immaterial. It was uncomfortable to watch, it made you kind of recoil a bit so there was no question actually about noticing what she was or wasn't wearing.

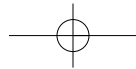
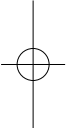
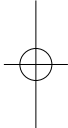
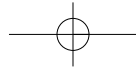
AL: The Mona Hatoum performance which was in the, what I recall as being the, sort of interpretation / exhibition part of the event. So the exhibition was on throughout, and Mona Hatoum's piece of work was in the corner by one of the doors into, you passed by it, as you went from one gallery to another and it was just like, you know, an open exhibition: plenty of light, [the] usual kind of exhibition with pictures and drawings and memorabilia from other live art performances plus Mona Hatoum in this strange cage in the corner with chicken wire that she'd built. So it was like a sort of shanty-town type thing. I suppose what she was doing was recreating, possibly, a refugee camp in Palestine, or Lebanon. I'm not quite sure, but that was what it felt like.

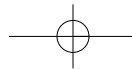
I do remember lots of things hanging around and also I do remember she had something in her hair. I don't remember there being lots of people at that particular performance because it would be people trickling in to see the exhibition. I think she might have had body makeup on and I think she had a brownie-red body-stocking which was actually somewhat controversial. But the Laing just felt that was just a step too far. Because the *Glory of the Garden* money had only just come to the museum, the museum was only just getting used to putting contemporary art in – you know, contemporary paintings, never mind contemporary Live Art. And Projects UK was

definitely not known for their let's be careful, let's try something easy here first, They'd be really backing Mona to be able to do the performance exactly as she wanted to do, rather than the Laing feeling that actually we've got to think about our audiences. We don't completely want to put off the people that are already coming. You know, we're wanting to introduce people to contemporary art not put them off. Whether nudity is such a big deal now, perhaps not, but I think the piece and the content of the piece would be just as controversial now as it was then, and actually I would say that during that time my feelings [are that] I think that was some of the most controversial work that the Laing Art Gallery has ever done.

I don't think we thought much about audiences then – I don't think we thought much about the impact it would have it was just this was absolutely important [and] crucial to the artist and to sort of shake things up a bit, and show this kind of work in an institution. And actually in Newcastle where else was it going to be shown? You know, it was either going to be shown in alternative spaces where a few artists and their friends would see it or you're going to be putting it in the mainstream, which maybe that was the thinking of the Arts Council at the time was to put investment in museums and art galleries, because actually in most towns that was the only show in town.







Artist's Notes

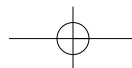
Anne Bean

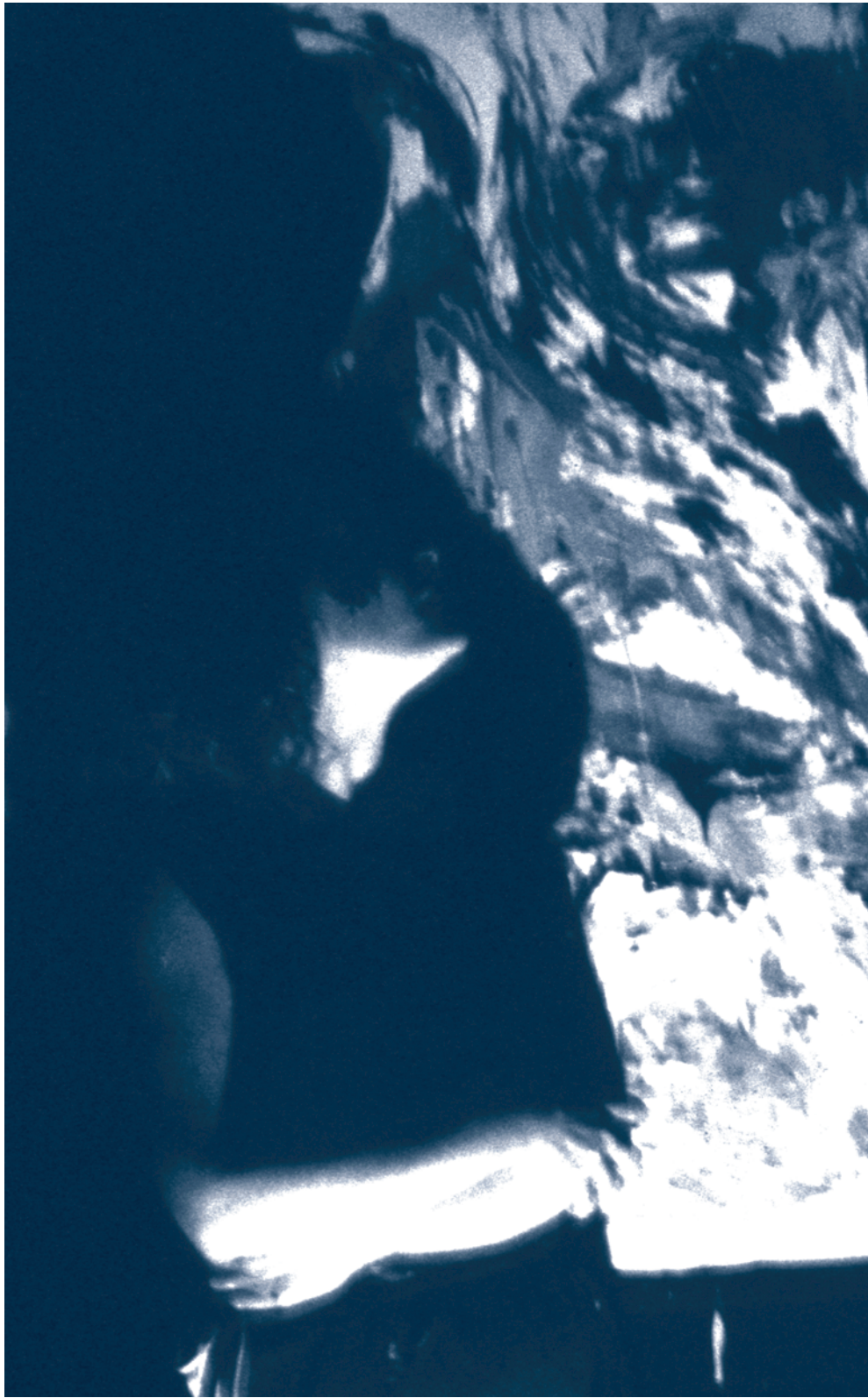
Anne Bean

When the curator, Sophia Hao, originally approached me about this project, I sensed it only in a liminal place, buried but resonant in some non-verbal hinterland. *Pain Tings* has grown from this into a revelatory experience for me about retrieval, connections, and how forgetting and disappearance have a powerful reverberation, offering a more luminous exploration than responding to thorough documentation. I found myself uncovering layers within layers, not ventured into for decades. The dark photos that Sophia had dug out from Locus+'s Archives of the original performance intrigued me and I decided, as an investigation, to try to re-create these in an intensive private performance. Numerous body-cell memories were aroused and I found myself trying to keep up with each trigger and unveiling. I was once again acutely aware that every painting throughout history was a document of its own live action and that fundamentally this revelation had been the spark for my initial venturings into performance/process work.

The performance at the Laing in 1987 had consisted of the production with witnesses of approximately ten paintings, each on a blank paper or canvas within an ornate gold frame. A vast range of ways of working was utilized. Two angels were painted with golden wings, on each side of wax that I dripped and set alight to form a phantom between them, whilst I chanted from and incorporated the words of the 'doom songs' of Babylon. I placed a golden statue in my mouth whilst I painted this same statue and spoke of its solid shape within my tongue like the magical incantations and litanies that have formed shapes in millions of mouths over centuries as the same words are repeated. A slide of a bee was projected onto perspex spinning in the room allowing it to 'fly' and 'land' on a paintings surface to be captured in charcoal over and over again. I referenced Goya's intense, haunting last works 'The Black Paintings' the first known paintings made to be kept hermetically private. I spoke about one of these works in which a desolate dog gazes into vast emptiness, juxtaposing this with the vastness of van Gogh's *Starry Nigh* which I painted with a repetitive swirling body motion. Each of the actions touched on the kinds of 'conversation' one has whilst painting and with a painting.

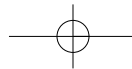
An intrinsic part of this painting process was the presence of the writer, critic and editor of Performance Magazine, Rob la Frenais. I asked Rob to respond to the work during the making of it so that he was both a critic and a part of what he was critiquing. He sat typing at a typewriter, 'ting', 'ting', 'ting', in the middle of the space, ostensibly making notes towards a review and then reading them out at arbitrary moments during the piece. I then used his words to include in the paintings or to change a thought about the next one. Rob represented for me both the voice of the audience, a collective pheromone that one is often finely tuned into during performance as well as the voice of the critic, overly powerful, literally changing career pathways.





Slides used during the original performance *Pain (tings)* on 1 May 1987





ANNE BEAN'S RECOLLECTIONS OF *PAIN TINGS*

On 27 February 2009, Sophia Y. Hao interviewed Anne Bean at the Laing Art Gallery. The following is an extract from the transcript of the interview.

It was a seemingly regional art gallery with paintings ... people think of Live Art or Performance Art or whatever you call it as a very separate activity – that is out of the fine art tradition. I wanted to very much place it in that tradition because, as far as I'm concerned, as a visual artist, that is where it comes directly from.

I can't remember exact details but I would've known about the Laing as a gallery. We'd actually done the Bow Gamelan here and caused chaos and furore, and so I would have had a notion of what I would have wanted to have done, taken into consideration – what was already here. I don't know how much information I gave them in advance; I know that the piece completely changed, or a significant part of the piece changed, when I arrived. Quite coincidentally, the person who had started *Performance Magazine*, Rob La Frenais, was here and I was talking to him. I was very, very interested in this notion of somebody writing about a piece and that changing one's future ideas, you know, sometimes somebody says something, either critically or in praise of something and then, consciously or subconsciously, it shifts one's notion of a piece of work. So I invited Rob La Frenais to be part of this work.

He had a typewriter and he sat with me in the space typing up as though he was taking notes to do a criticism of the piece. It became a present-time criticism which shaped the work in the space ... I wanted it to feel like when a gallery attendant or curator takes a group of people around a gallery and explains the paintings to this little group, so they'd gather by one painting but of course it was completely blank, so instead of explaining it to them visually, the painting suddenly appears before their eyes, it's like a visual conversation about the painting being made.

There was one piece entirely to do with Rob talking to me; a painting purely about words. I would get him to read through his text and then just jot down words from it. I didn't remember this but I can see from this photograph, there's words like, 'memories' actually written there ... Then there were pieces purely to do with body interaction, I'd take a mouthful of paint, scream at the painting so the paint would be projected onto the surface and then I would use my hands to explain it so the piece would be built up purely from body and sound movements ... Then there was a piece that was to do with doodling; whenever I doodle, I doodle an angel ... Again it's very interesting, if these photos didn't exist,

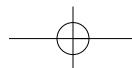
you know, I'm not sure how many of these I would've remembered.

I'm very aware of peoples thought processes, or how I perceive them in performance. This piece, I think, partly was to do with that notion, and Rob was almost acting as the voice of the audience in that way; somebody witnessing the piece and responding so that one's actually reading thoughts in the space immediately. After the performance I do remember talking very intensely to Rob about the experience. I never use words like 'being happy' with a performance, but I did find it a very formative piece of work, and it's very strange saying that with the notion of having forgotten. I mean I didn't forget that I'd done a piece of work with Rob, you know, I just didn't remember that this was the piece of work.

I very much believed, and still do work that refers to ephemerality, spontaneity, things disappearing ... at the time there was a very, very strong sense of, as you say, spiritually, you know, art as a sort of gateway between the material and the immaterial, between physical and metaphysical, and somehow I think a lot of performance art has felt like gateways in that world ... but that there was something very magnificent about just sharing it in present time, and that it just existed between the

witnesses and the witnessed and then that was it.

I'm very pleased to be doing the interview in this space because, every now and again, I have had that eerie sense, and I think people talk about ghosts because they're aware of other things that have happened in spaces and every now and again I feel that maybe I passed through this very spot where I'm sitting, you know, or maybe Rob was sitting right here or maybe the whole audience had a moment right here ... That this very space contained this piece, it has heightened my awareness of doing it and of, sort of, digging back, you know, it just adds another resonance and another layer to how one perceives the past.



ROB LA FRENAIS (AND ANNE BEAN'S) RECOLLECTIONS OF PAIN TINGS

On 26 May 2009, Sophia Y. Hao interviewed Rob La Frenais (RLF) and Anne Bean (AB) at The Arts Catalyst in London. The following is an extract from the transcript of the interview.

RLF: I had been editor of *Performance Magazine* since 1979, and around that time, 1987, I curated something at the Laing Art Gallery called 'Confrontations' about art and controversy which I think took place after this performance programme that we're talking about. Anne, I knew through her work with Bow Gamelan Ensemble (and other things) came up to me and said that she was thinking about doing some sort of collaboration and she was interested in the notion of recording, recording her performance, or reviewing it. We talked through the idea that I would actually be there in the space with a typewriter, as opposed to a computer this being 1987, and I would be doing something that we were just saying would be rather similar to the notion of blogging in a pre-technological era ... little did I know that I'd be sitting here over 20 years later on a project about memory! I think it's important to put it in context of the era, *Performance Magazine* was a small magazine of its time, it was part of a boom of a few other small magazines, including *Art Monthly*. But it was a very close community and you would know that, if you reviewed something, you were very likely to meet the person who you'd reviewed at a social event. So it was actually a kind of funny feedback loop but it also led to some quite

difficult situations. If something was written it really would affect people quite emotionally, almost disproportionately. I can think of several cases where I had actually not written something and people thought that I had written something. I think this relates to something that Anne Bean and I had been talking about: the mythological quality of live performances, in terms of what did take place or what might not have taken place (Anne agrees). Archiving is an interesting sort of attempt to try and freeze that reality but I don't think it will always completely get there but we can try and dredge our memories. I can't personally conjure up sitting there in that space with you at that time Anne, I know I was to your left.

AB: Well you were in the centre Rob and I had the paintings all round so I moved round you.

RLF: OK.

AB: And what I remember very distinctly, which I hadn't taken into account previously, was the sound.

RLF: Yes, I was going to say, it would've been noisy because I probably would have asked for an electric typewriter rather than ... or it may have been a manual I don't know.

AB: I remember it as a manual.

RLF: You think it was a manual? I'm quite hard on my keys, so it's quite possible if it was a manual that it was quite noisy. So I would have produced a piece of paper on which there would have been a piece of text which would have been a review. I would've taken it out of the typewriter and then what?

AB: Well, what I remember is that I kept turning to you and saying, "What have you written?" So you would type away, I would do this drawing, and you'd feedback but then whatever you said to me of what you'd written, would feedback into the next drawing. So that certain key words or moments or thought or ideas then fed the next drawing, that's my memory of it ... again, it comes back to historicisation and how it happens, I mean if that had suddenly got a big review somewhere and there was a picture of Rob with his typewriter and me with this painting and they say 'iconic performance predicts technological'

RLF: Well, we all know that in the history books there were like these performances, where there were probably three people and a dog, and the photograph looks brilliant and has gone into the history books. ... But it is interesting how the lens of historical

focus does actually tilt those things but, you know, that's why we have researchers running around trying to get the fragments that got away [Anne laughs] ... right now!

AB: But I still truly believe that, even if nobody remembers it, these things have fed in, in some subliminal way, into bits of work which people wouldn't have a recollection of where they came from and, in a way, that interests me a lot more. You know people have come up to me and spoken about performances I've done that I've hardly any memory of...

RLF: But you should also remember that in that era, we were still in the era of definitions taking place, so there wasn't really such a thing as a curator even in that era, and the words 'performance artist' was a very disputed term: even *Performance Magazine* wasn't specifically about performance, it was named after the Nicolas Roeg movie, and was about the idea of, like, culture somehow being a performance or life being a performance or reflecting those issues. The Arts Council tried to specifically write the word 'Performance Art' out of things. This term 'Live Art' was specifically a UK phenomenon, which in my view, came out of the fact that some bureaucrats found it very difficult to

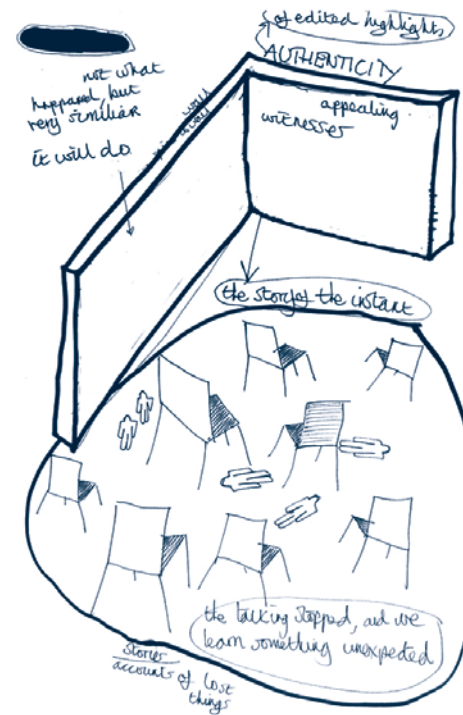
stomach early performance art and tried to sort of water it down by linking it in with certain kinds of community art or carnival [Anne agrees]. So I think the whole issue of performance is quite disputed in this country.

AB: Very much so. I think all the definitions are so slippery to the point where one would feel extremely strange calling oneself a 'performance artist' even though people do say, you know, it just feels not a current terminology of any sort ...

RLF: The other part of your question about the false memory I think is quite interesting. I was quite interested myself to what happened to people when they entered performances as an audience, and I think there's two things you can say about it: I think with performance art – which I define personally as something which is not terribly pre-scripted, although may be pre-structured – it's a situation where it's almost unrepeatable, anything could happen and it's an anything could happen type situation, that's one of the definitions of Performance Art: it's an action which is not repeatable in the same way. And the other thing I should say is that performance can often be, in the best sense, very visceral. I can remember going to performances and coming out with a real sense of sort of fundamental change in my own being from being at that performance,

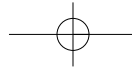
which was not related to what they did but related to somehow a change of state engendered by the specific set of circumstances that happened in the performance.

I think at that point, the Laing Art Gallery was being opened up for the first time if you like to the rough and ready public. It was bringing in the scruffy students for the first time. And I remember seeing some of the other performances and there was definitely a sense of taking over the palace of culture. This was encouraged by Mike, and also the work of Projects UK, Jon Bewley and Simon Herbert, and the others working there. ... coming to Newcastle was quite a big thing at that point, you know, it was a long journey from London and you got this real sense of a sort of culture that had developed away from London, very, very specific, slightly isolated but very specific atmosphere of the time in Newcastle, that was actually quite exciting when you came from the outside to experience it for the first time. ... There's a lot of nostalgia about performance right now [laughs], that's for sure, and I think it's very interesting that younger artists are making work, archiving eras just immediately before their birth. Actually, I find that fascination quite interesting. And I think re-enactment is interesting. It has to do with the way we regard media right now as well: that media is there to be plundered



Notes on NOTES: Writers in Residence
John Dummett





**‘Arrive-t-il?’ ‘Is it happening?’
Questions of duration and the ephemeral
in Acconci, Abramović and Lyotard**

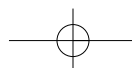
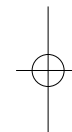
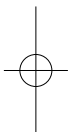
Christopher Bamford



This paper is concerned with the writings of French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, his writings on art and how his ideas are useful when thinking about performance art, its documentation and re-performance.

One of the themes of *NOTES on a return*, the ephemeral, is partly responsible for the configuration I will attempt to enact. The ephemeral is usually thought of as that which passes, whose longevity is limited, time-bound and short; it could be a momentary event whether performance, action or the use of material which will demise or change radically. It is this radical transformation that I want to consider in terms of what Lyotard calls ‘event’ and consider its applicability to the ephemeral event of the performance. I want to argue that Lyotard’s ‘event’ is analogous to the ephemeral, it is short lived and transformative. Lyotard refers to it as a question: ‘*Arrive-t-il?*’ which is usually translated as ‘Is it happening?’ But which also plays on the meaning of the French verb *arriver* – to arrive. Therefore ‘Is it happening?’ simultaneously asks – is it arriving? Answering this question, however, is not straightforward. Lyotard’s ‘event’ cannot be predetermined; it is, rather, the moment of questioning. It is a moment of uncertainty and the indeterminate. I’ll try to explain why.

The book which Lyotard considered his major philosophical work is called *Le Différend* (1983), it is an analysis of language and communication in which he talks of ‘*phrases*’ – this would translate directly as ‘sentences’ but usually the word ‘phrase’ is kept in order to draw attention to the claim that a phrase is not only a linguistic entity but can also be silence, or a gesture. Each phrase presents a ‘universe of phrases’ which consists of the instances by which it is defined and may include one or more of the following: addressor, addressee, referent and sense. But it is worth noting that: ‘The universe presented by a phrase is not presented to something or to someone



like a “subject”. [...] A “subject” is situated in a universe presented by a phrase’.¹

According to Lyotard each phrase follows a previous phrase and is potentially open to be linked onto in different ways – through a phrase of reasoning, questioning, showing, describing, ordering etc. However, Lyotard argues that the previous phrase carries with it the rules of the type of discourse (the genre) to which it belongs, and therefore the linkages are not as open as might be thought – each type of discourse, each genre has certain goals eg. to teach, to seduce, to justify, to evaluate: and to attain these goals a particular type of linkage is necessary.

‘Event’ is when the link to the next phrase has not yet been determined, when it remains contingent: it is ‘The suspense of the linking’², the question of ‘*Arrive-t-il?*’.

Event cannot be anticipated, otherwise its linkage is predetermined. Event takes place in the ‘Now’, before it is linked, before it is established what it is, before it is given a definite article. As soon as it is linked onto it is subject to significant alteration: it is rendered the referent of a phrase and therefore it loses its singularity and stops being ‘event’ but becomes ‘**the** event’ – a referent in past time – or ‘an event’, thereby made similar to other events. Only in its event of questioning while it is still contingent can it be ‘event’ or occurrence with the potentiality and radical nature of the undecidable. For Lyotard, it is opening up this question of ‘*Arrive-t-il?*’, which is the objective for art.

Marina Abramović’s Seven “Easy” Pieces

We are dealing here with an ephemeral state, one which may easily (perhaps too easily) be thought of in terms of wider art historical processes: as that which has yet to be categorised, explained, contextualised and therefore subjected to the processes which capture the ephemeral. Of course, that is a limited, stereotypical and regressive characterisation of art history and the process of the museumification of thought which sometimes takes place. Yet it is exactly that which Marina Abramović, it would appear, is anxious to ensure for the future of performance art.

I want to consider an aspect of her project *Seven Easy Pieces*, which was performed at the Guggenheim, New York in 2005. Over a seven-day period she performed a different piece each evening: five pieces were re-performances of seminal works from the 1970s by other artists (Bruce Nauman; Vito Acconci; Valie Export; Gina Pane; Joseph Beuys); one was a re-performance of one of her own works from this period and the series ended with the performance of a new piece. As a project it is a fascinating engagement with the issues raised by the ephemeral nature of performance – it is, in itself, an exploration of the means by which performance can be both re-performed and documented – but I want to point out what may be a paradox, by highlighting that which is motivating her desire to re-enact the chosen works from the early 1970s. She speaks of regret – a regret that she had been unable to witness many early performances and a further regret that there was a tendency at the time to shun documentation, in order that the performance itself be the whole work. As she writes:

I lived in Yugoslavia and it was very difficult to get information about performance events from abroad. All I could get at the time were Xeroxed images. Occasionally, there were also bad quality pirate video recordings. Most of the time, testimony was just word-of-mouth from witnesses who claimed they saw the performance or said that they knew somebody who had seen it.³

*I remember a performance by Abramović, in a grand baroque palace in the centre of Madrid, not in the 1970s but in 1992. At least, I think I remember a performance – I remember the **feeling** of the performance, at least my reaction to what I was told happened.*

*In retrospect I realise that what was described to me was her piece from 1973 *Rhythm 10* which involved Abramović splaying her hand on a table top, taking a kitchen knife and rhythmically stabbing the spaces between her fingers, increasing the rhythm of the stabbing and the risks which were involved.*

But what I really remember is the anticipation, the atmosphere – I can find no record of which performance took place – certainly she performed the following week when the same festival had its second leg in London – but not in Madrid. I now think she didn’t perform, or if she did I arrived too late and missed it.

And yet the memory is so powerful, mixed with what was presumably someone else's account of Rhythm 10 and which they probably never saw either; and yet it wasn't ephemeral for me: it is very much alive and present – just in the same way that those performances which Abramović never saw have carried the question of contingency – 'the Arrive-t-il?' – and driven her to this series of re-performances.

Abramovic reiterates the extent to which early 1970s performance worked on hearsay and whisper: 'If everybody who claimed to see the performances had actually been present, then thousands would have witnessed body art events. [...] Most of the time there were only about four or five friends there. The unreliability of the documents and the witnesses led to the total mystification and misrepresentation of the actual events. This created a huge space for projection and speculation'.⁴

It is this very 'space for projection and speculation' which, I want to argue, is central to the power which performance can exert. Because it is partial, inexact forms of documentation create a situation where a lack of certainty reigns, it is a realm that is conducive to the contingent. Therefore the destabilising effect, which was the aim of many of these performances, can be continued – one which the drive to exhaustive documentation which Abramović proposes, may stifle. The conditions which she suggests are as follows:

- Ask the artist for permission
- Pay the artist for copyright
- Perform a new interpretation of the piece
- Exhibit the original material: photographs, videos, relics.
- Exhibit a new interpretation of the piece.

These conditions, she suggests, will give performance 'a stable grounding in art history'⁵ but in doing so won't these prescriptive demands fetishize the original performance still further, stabilise it as a referent of any re-performance and minimise the contingency of linking?

As part of *Seven Easy Pieces* Abramović re-performed her own interpretation of Vito Acconci's 1972 piece *Seedbed*. *Seedbed* was part of an exhibition by Vito Acconci at the Sonnabend Gallery, New York, which consisted of

three performance situations, each needed the presence of the artist to be 'activated'. In Acconci's performance the gallery space was discretely altered to incorporate a sloping ramp under which the artist was secreted. As Acconci was hidden from view in the performance space there was some uncertainty as to the whereabouts of the artists – his voice was relayed to the visitor through the single speaker but even then, as Acconci himself acknowledged, some may have thought that the sound was a tape. In Abramović's performance in the Guggenheim, a separate circular structure was built as a performance area under which the artist was clearly located and onto which the audience could ascend. This purpose-built structure removed the ambiguity of 'presence' that was part of the original set-up.

Acconci's *Seedbed* was specifically about exploiting the 'space of projection and speculation' of which Abramović talks. I am suggesting, that at the heart of Abramović's re-performance, is the paradox that drew her to this history in the first place: the instability of the referent in these early pieces: the possibility of the question mark, of the 'Arrive-t-il?' and the contingency of 'event' before it is linked onto as 'the event'. This is something wholly supported by the inexact ways in which *Seedbed* has been documented. Starting with the edition of the magazine *Avalanche* dedicated to Acconci in 1972, the date of the performance is widely misreported as 1971, an error repeated by RoseLee Goldberg in 2001 and Melvin Carlson in 2004, the French art magazine *Art Press* in an edition from 1972 perhaps misprinted the date as 1973 and the most wildly inaccurate, is a French history of performance art by Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux, published in 1988, which gives *Seedbed* the date 1979. In the catalogue for *7 easy pieces*, the dates are correctly recorded as January 15 – 29, 1972 but in the transcript of Abramović's monologue – spoken whilst re-performing *Seedbed* and busy creating what she termed 'heat and moisture' – the date slips once more: 'I'm doing Vito Acconci piece, the *Seedbed*, what he made in Sonnabend Gallery in 73, masturbating under the floor of the gallery'.

Similarly, the reports of the hours of activation vary even in contemporary reviews, in 1972, from 'two afternoons a week' (Pincus-Witten) to 'whole days' (Schjedldahl) and the Acconci archive seems to positively promote the mystification – three conflicting press releases were exhibited together as part



of the show of his work in Liverpool in 2005 and are variously reproduced in recent publications without necessarily acknowledging the conflicting information. The 2001 monograph by Gloria Moure reports ‘9 days, 8 hours a day, a 3 week exhibition’ whilst Kate Linker’s monograph from 1994 opts for the more dramatic ‘for the duration of the exhibition’. Martha Buskirk (2005) shows a canny wariness when writing of *Seedbed* in *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* and states that ‘By his own description he was under the ramp two or three days per week for the duration of the exhibition’⁶. There can be no more contingent object than the document of a performance piece, it would seem, particularly one which deals with such ‘intimate activities’. Without doubt the various manners in which the piece is reported, whether colourful or coy, adds to the tension which exist in the piece itself, as these quotes show:

‘... in his work *Seedbed*, 1972, under a [floor] in a public space, a New York gallery, he performed a most intimate act of the body’. (Barzel, 1991)

‘The most notorious involved a large, closed wooden ramp under which Acconci spent whole days in determined solitary sex while, as a wall label asserted, fantasizing about people present in the gallery’. (Schjeldahl, *Art in America*, 1972)

‘Within this wedge, Acconci passed 2 afternoons a week in a “private sexual activity”, stated bluntly, in masturbation’. (Pincus-Witten, *Art Forum*, 1972)

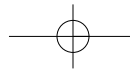
‘In room A (*Seed Bed*) Acconci lay hidden beneath a room-sized, slanting plywood false-floor intoning words of love to the women walking over him, masturbating and moaning into a microphone.’ (Kingsley, *Art News*, 1972)

‘Acconci was playing his part while playing with his parts.’ (Scarpetta, 1981)

‘Installed under a ramp in New York’s Sonnabend Gallery for six hours a day, five days a week, Acconci is said to have masturbated at intervals throughout’ (Goldberg, 1998)

‘Seedbed (1971), performed at the Sonnabend Gallery, New York, became the most notorious of these works. In it Acconci masturbated under a ramp built into the gallery over which the visitors walked.’ (Goldberg, 2001)

I am particularly drawn to the difference between the two publications by RoseLee Goldberg which move from ‘Acconci is said to have masturbated’, to just accepting that he did it. The duration, intensity and description vary to such an extent that the performance remains in flux and, contrary to my initial fears, Abramović’s re-performance adds similarly to this effect. The way in which Abramović documents the work acknowledges Acconci’s own regret that he never taped the audio –so in her performance she tapes everything meticulously and includes a transcription in the book – she also makes an attempt to record the reactions of the audience, and the transcripts of conversations from seven roving microphones are also included. This is particularly interesting in relation to the Acconci re-performance because the audience is making comparisons to a work about which there is already so much myth, speculation and ambiguity. There is a sense of uncertainty as to how they ought to react, a sense which is clearly in keeping with the idea I am working with in relation to Lyotard’s event, and my fear that contingency might be closed down is not borne out. I had feared that the preceding phrase would determine the type of linkage and limit contingency: that knowledge of the piece might lead to expectations being fulfilled not frustrated. Yet, rather than fulfilling expectations and linking in the expected manner, the audience find themselves reacting against the mis-match with



their expectations: the transfer of the work into the huge institution of the Guggenheim, for example, means that many struggle to find the intimacy or confrontation they expect and consequently they begin to reflect on what they know (or think they know) about the 'original' in order locate their frustration. This feeling of uncertainty relates to Lyotard's concern in *The Differend* regarding the presentation of a feeling as a phrase: 'Feelings as a phrase for what cannot now be phrased'⁷. This is the feeling of uncertainty that event produces, but as it can exist only in the now it will always remain ephemeral.

Coda?

I feel as though I ought to link on with a conclusion but instead I'll add a coda: I want to reiterate that the '*Arrive-t-il?*' of the Lyotardian event is not necessarily the event of the performance but that 'event' could be as likely to occur in the gap opened by the non-representative aspects of its documentation or a double take at a re-performance, consequently it brings into question the privileging of 'liveness'. Secondly, I introduced the ephemeral as being short lived and suggested that the event is analogous to the ephemeral, but it is important to stress that according to Lyotard '*Arrive-t-il?*' does not belong to chronological time but to its own time of the now and therefore its duration can only be ascertained once it enters the network of linkages. This means that '*Arrive-t-il?*' may open up a duration which, rather than being short lived, doesn't in fact find a linkage for some time – but only when it is linked can its ephemeral status be reflected upon.



¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. George Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p.71.

² Ibid, p. 70.

³ Marina Abramović, *7easy pieces*, Milan: Charta, 2005, p. 9.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 9, 10.

⁵ Ibid, p. 11.

⁶ Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005, pp. 213, 215.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.70.

