

Actuality Performances in Yorkshire

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Performance art is sometimes seen as a species of autobiography, or representation of personal experience. It is possible to adduce, from the evidence of performances like the one given by Alistair MacLennan in the British Art Show (see AM 87), a theoretical evaluation of performance work, in which 'artificiality' may be set against an opposite, and preferable, 'reality'.

'A complaint that can be levelled at art engaged in media re-presentation of images of women, nature, etc., in an artificial light is that rather than commenting or intervening, the art is subsumed into the same condition. The two performances by Nick Stewart and Alistair MacLennan,... were not concerned with the pleasure of the seductive image but in confronting the viewer with the opposite.'

(Joan Fowler, writing in 'CIRCA' No.18, review of Irish Exhibition of Living Art, Dublin 1984).

It depends rather on what you find 'seductive', and, logically, its opposite. In another review of Nick Stewart's work in Ireland (by Dr Slavka Sverakova, in 'Crane Bag' Vol.6 No.2) in Belfast 1982, he is identified as a member of '...a group of young people who share a profound interest in light as energy, as instrument and as experience.'

Dr Sverakova also points out that Nick Stewart 'does both performance art and drawing'.

Nick Stewart, in the programme note accompanying his performance 'Over Walls Over Borders - Within Moving Without' at the Huddersfield Art Gallery, speaks of - '... objects and materials (relating to the activities of building and gardening) brought into new relationships... used to suggest, symbolically and metaphorically, an order of reality reflecting 'wholeness' rather than the orthodox 'system' of 'dichotomies'. Dr Sverakova, in her earlier review, proposes an interpretation of an earlier work 'in terms of our divided society and the will of centrifugal forces to bond these parts together'. (op. cit.) Nick Stewart performed his piece himself, in one afternoon and evening in Huddersfield. He walked a figure-of-eight from one room to another, passing through a central doorway that was approached, on both sides, down a corridor of corrugated iron, like the checkpoints in the inner 'wall' round Belfast city centre. Into this iron-bound doorway two projectors alternately shot slides of Belfast's broken townscape, onto strips of white material that hung in the doorway. Nick Stewart pushed a wheelbarrow in which was planted an oak sapling. There was a bobbing electric torch on the barrow, and the wheel ran over a track of broken glass. Sheets of newspaper hung in each room, to be rushed against, and there was the regular sound of a timed 'bleep'.

This was a very direct performance, in spite of the 'symbols' of British presence, of dangerous streets, and of 'looking-glass cross-overs' (every other slide image was back-to-front, because it came from the 'other room'). The travail of the figure pushing the barrow remained in the imagination - his, ours; it was not so much shared as revealed, by light (only the torch and the white parts of the slides), by movement, and a little sound. Because Nick Stewart's performance communicated something unavailable to us here in England, but which is painfully relevant to us, it worked powerfully.



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