

THE PERFORMANCE ARTIST AS ACTUATOR - A PARADIGMATIC CASE STUDY

Although associated with performance art as a category, MacLennan really creates installations or environments. Sometimes these become arenas for the intervention of the single active figure (himself); at other times they are constructed to remain without the body present as actuator (a term MacLennan has coined and prefers).¹ However one situation invokes the other; correspondences exchange. And when the self-reliant installation becomes complex the artist likens it to the act of painting in which he originally trained.

MacLennan usually assembles objects and butchered animal fragments and disposes them thoughtfully about a space after establishing a frame of reference with some material on the floor. He then walks for extended periods of time among these chosen relics of a global hurt or split system, changing direction at times to draw or shift an object. They are like the detritus of some kind of after-scourge; the apparatus of disablement. It is art revealed in time and the artist an inter-media agent.

Some installation work has been criticised as a simplistic array of objects assuming connections and lacking intervention by the artist to establish a creative synthesis. MacLennan's work, however, assures transformations and conversions. There is often a ritualistic 'walking out' of something (especially in the earlier work). Sometimes this ritual can be very minimalistic; at other times more complex.

In *Days and Nights*, (1981) Aene Gallery, London, he 'lived' a continuous art work for one hundred and forty four hours (i.e. day and night). Flour was spread in a loop around the gallery floor and the artist, sometimes clothed, sometimes naked and body marked, walked the path of the flour. The gallery was open twenty four hours a day and people came and went and returned while the walking trampled the rhythms of its history into the gallery floor. It engendered a kind of perambulating mourning for an unknown transgressive act. In 1985, as part of MacLennan's contribution to the

British Art Show, at the Mappin Gallery, Sheffield, a waiting, haunting, tape-loop sound track invited people upstairs to a 'mangling' performance/installation, called *Body Break*. A square of white flour on the floor, once again, set the walking framework for the artist/the actuator and the operational field in which to place his objects - a basket of earth, a wheelbarrow, a fire-extinguisher, scaffolding. While walking he marked time with black tape on the gallery walls on which he also made drawings. An old washing-day mangle had fish and Northern Irish newspapers (headline: 'Hell in Jungle') set to be crushed between its rollers. *Body Break* lasted seventy two hours. Robert Ayres determined that the strength of the piece lay in its enormous length - a strength that made the piece 'combative and arresting'. He also recognised the intermedia effectiveness of MacLennan's working method:

'Again and again he brushed around the square of flour, tidying up its edges; or slowing, as though measuring, he'd run his finger in from the edge of the flour, continuing the squaring of the cork tiles into his own large, more important square. And even if they left after a few minutes... *Body Break* continued to work in the minds of its spectators... I found it a great and frightening and poetic lament of a performance'.¹

A Tate Gallery survey once concluded that viewers only look at works of art for very short periods. A prolonged engagement with time is desirable for an artist with social and political intentions. Time, and body acts ensure the sustaining of a dynamic poetics in MacLennan's performance/installations.

In *Body Break* as in many other works in the past, MacLennan used dead fish and wore a balaclava. The fish, of course, is an established symbol of the Christian Church but, for the artist, it also symbolises the subconscious as a fluid life force and creativity. The balaclava makes local references in that it was used by paramilitaries in N. Ireland but also refers to MacLennan's two year period

studying Zen with a Rinzai master. But it is through the body itself that he overcomes body/mind splits. According to the artist:

'If you fuse your thinking and doing then you can make much more essential action - you make the experience palpable'.³

Old buildings with memories and histories in the carcass of their structures attract the artist. In 1986 in a massive disused warehouse in Sandyford, England, with two open interior levels, MacLennan arranged in rows old hospital beds with bales of hay resting on each. Titled *Lie to Lay*, partially inflated balloons were hung from the upper tier over every second bed on the ground floor. A large mass of second-hand clothing formed a line up the centre of the warehouse. Concerns about British health care and provision drove the artist, wearing a gas mask, about the abandoned 'ward' to the interfered-with sounds of Land of Hope and Glory and sheep calling. As actuator, MacLennan, for a period of one hundred and twenty hours dismantled and unsettled the beds and lay and redispersed piles of the clothes (male and female).

Occasionally the artist uses the element of fire in his work. In 1988 he sat perched on a beam in the burnt out hulk of a building in the Temple Bar area of Dublin. He would re-position himself at appropriate times. 'The Burn' was an eight hour 'squatting' of a scorched interior and roofless space. The floor was covered with dead leaves and halved pigs heads were positioned around the floor and walls. Two ropes hung from the beam as did remnants of British and Irish flags.

Steve Durland saw the work as transcending the Northern Irish conflict to comment on more general horror.

'For MacLennan, I think, the installations are metaphors of the destructiveness humans consciously and unconsciously perpetrate, and

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his participation in the works is a personal meditation that tries to resolve that destruction in his own mind. He offers the viewer the opportunity to develop his/her own understanding. If you decline the opportunity, that's an option he also has no control over'.²

Words as utterances appeal to MacLennan. Word phrases for titles and statements are often de-verbified as in *Slow No.* (1988) or *Birth, Death, Day.* (1984). Short words line up together as in *Out and In.* (1987). They seem to reflect the relocations and the displacements in the 'actuations'. They halt the language and they help depict the artist's world view as 'both/and' rather than "either/or".³

This strategy of oppositions, of course, parallels the nature of conflict itself and its solution as an accommodation and assimilation of difference. There is a deeply holistic approach to his life and work.

For the Available Resources project in Derry (1992) MacLennan in his *Lager A Dair piece* (a rolling play on words of the former funeral parlour Adair's where the work was sited) celebrated life in a place of death. He covered the walls with blank 'birth certificates' of Derry/Londonderry's newly born boys and girls. These anonymous 'life certificates' offered a responsibility for protection for growth like the oak tree (a symbol for the city's name as oak grove in Irish) placed in the room reaching to the ceiling.

The installation extended to another room and also the artist made a timed walk around the war memorial at the Diamond in the city. In the second room he placed flags (Irish and British), buckets with water and weeds, a leather boot, among other things. On the wall were two maps of Ireland and he provided a text to complete the intermediation at work,

'Black U Jack - Tri no colour

Do we think, march or stand

Collectors of dust.

Hate, Tradition, Delusion?

What all children?

At the Diamond memorial the artist carried a globe of the world which would eventually split in two - a life/death rift.

More recently MacLennan has joined "Black Market International", a group of eight artists from different European countries. They meet a few times a year and they perform individual works at the same time in an improvisational mode. MacLennan likes the challenge of live work, improvising without relying on what he has produced before. The issues remain constant: ethics, aesthetics, living, being. His aim is to be flexible in his means of expression. The artist recalls once seeing graffiti on an art college wall in Aberdeen.

"The Hardening Of Categories Leads To Art Disease".

Dr Liam Kelly

1. See Seamus Heaney again in 'Feeling into Words', op.cit. when he speaks of 'A Search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament', p.56.
2. Mickey Donnelly as quoted in, *On the Balcony of the Nation* Exhibition Catalogue, A.C.N.I. 1990, (unpaginated).
3. See Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out*, Faber and Faber, London, Boston. See also P.V. Glob, *The Bog People*, London, Faber and Faber, 1969/
4. Artists statement in *Catherine Harper, A Beginning*, exhibition catalogue, Orchard Gallery, Derry, 1991, p.7.
5. *Wintering Out*, op.cit.
6. Interview with the marie Barrett, June 1992.
7. Interview with the Paul Sherrard, June 1992.