

NATIONAL REVIEW OF LIVE ART 1987

A MESSAGE TO THE KUNST

FUHRERS

AT THE END of my review of the Platform section of the 1986 National Review (new and untried young artists selected from auditions around the country) I wrote 'The Platform is great but it's not enough.' (Performance 44). I wrote this at a time when the fate of the Midland Group, where the platform started and grew up, was in the balance. Since then of course the Midland Group has collapsed and the National Review, complete with Platform, has found a temporary new home at Riverside Studios, London. Clearly its survival beyond the Midland Group and the willingness of the Arts Council to support its continuation away from the Midland Group is some kind of testament to the annual events significance. It is still the only major attempt made in this country to seek out new performance artists and intervene in the usual process of artists going ignored for years until either they stop making performances in favour of some more 'acceptable' way of working or, rarely, hang on with ferocious tenacity and join Britain's meagre ranks of 'established' performance artists. The translation of the Platform to the larger, prestige London venue will mean there's even less excuse for the event to be ignored by the media, the funders and the promoters. It is obviously more than the Midland Group Platform and the test of whether this will

be enough will come slowly in the years that follow when we see whether this showing really benefits the artists involved.

As to the National Review itself, Nikki Millican, the events doggedly determined organiser, has complained that the event has no foreign participants this year (last year it included Academia Ruchu and Peter Baren), through lack of funding. I'm not sure this is such a failing. The programme for this year's Review includes a great number of British artists who, whilst earning some of the respect they deserve outside of London, and indeed abroad, remain for the most part unknown within the capital. It is one of the most inexcusable phenomena of British artistic life that there is no regular London promoter of performance art. Alistair MacLennan, for example, who is without doubt one of the most important performance artists in Europe, who has worked extensively abroad, has never had a major London showing. Nick Stewart, one of the most promising young

artists working in the area in Britain has made only cursory incursions into the capital. Annie Griffin, who must be one of the most sort-after young performers, spends most of her time on the road doing one-nighters away from London, and so the list goes on.

The absence of any international 'stars' from the programme may well be a blessing in disguise since it will force the audiences to focus on British work without the glamorous distraction of foreign visitors to fete. The quality of the work on offer in the National Review will speak for itself. The irony of the lack of attention paid by the metropolitan Kunst Fuhrers to this work which has been proliferating outside of London, especially in the north of England, is that much of it fits quite neatly into the neo-expressionist international style which the arbiters of taste have hyped so successfully in recent years.

So this is my message to London's globe trotting curators and programmers. *Britain is producing some of the best new performance artists in the world.* Now is the chance to catch up on what you have turned your backs on. It's time to make amends for your inactivity. ●

Full details of the National Review of Live Art from Riverside Studios.
STEVE ROGERS.

PERFORMANCE

PREVIEW



Diane Esguevre
& Keith Khan

PHOTO / CHRIS BISHOP

BRACKNELL 87

Previewed by JEZ WELSH.

THIS YEAR, from Friday 30th October to Sunday 1st November, the Media Centre at South Hill Park, Bracknell are presenting their 8th annual festival of Independent Video. In 1986 a pattern was set for the curatorial structure of the festival whereby each programme was 'sponsored' by a magazine. This year PERFORMANCE has been asked to contribute to the festival, and will be presenting a programme of tapes that aims to highlight the work of a younger generation of video artists who are bringing new blood and fresh ideas to a tradition — if video art can be seen as such — that is now in its twenty first year.

It is an apt time to reflect upon Video's brief but varied history; all over the (western) world, in museums and big festivals, video's cognescenti are taking stock, the definitive versions of the history are even now being written. The very notion of a definitive history is absurd in the British context; there is simply not enough documentary material in the UK from which to develop an ordered history. Paradoxically, for

an electronic medium, British Video Art has an oral history. But outside the UK things are very different. The international festival circuit, to which the British have latterly made a belated entry, is by now a well established medium for the building of careers, whether of artists, curators or critics, and the careers that have flourished most spectacularly under this system will produce the definitive histories.

How precisely this relates to the Bracknell Video Festival is determined in terms of the status, credibility or kudos of the event, relative to its European or North American counterparts. Bluntly, Bracknell, though an immensely useful get together for the British Independents, has no status in the vocabulary of the international circuit simply because it is not an international event. This may seem a simplistic observation, but its significance runs to the very heart of what is British Video and why it is so relatively unsuccessful compared to American or German Video in particular or European Video in general. As I have argued relentlessly over the past five years, it is nothing to do with the *quality* of the work either in terms of its content or its execution; British video artists, documentarists and independent producers can and do make work that is every bit as coherent, sophisticated and mature as that of our European and North American counterparts. What holds us back is a chronic lack of promotional support that reflects a debased status in the cultural hierarchy, whose effects are evident at every level of pro-

duction, distribution, promotion and critical debate.

So how can 'we', how can 'Bracknell' address these problems? I do not wish to suggest that there is an easy answer, though a big injection of cash and the confidence of funding agencies would go a long way to help. But as long as Britain lacks a credible international event, it can not and will not have an influential voice in the development of an international video culture. At present the best thing we have going for us is Channel 4 which is the envy of most other video active nations, but the tiny proportion of tapemakers who are supported by the channel directly can in no way reflect the enormous diversity and genuine vigour of the wider constituency. British tapes are beginning to have an impact, our voices are starting to be heard, but one still senses that we are always the last name on the guest list, we are never expected to speak with the voice of authority. A good start would be for Bracknell to Go International, not in the token fashion that its current budget dictates, but in a real way that will involve a quantum leap not just for this event, but for the whole 'sector' it (tries to) represent.

To return to earth, however: Performance's programme at the festival has to say something about the year's output and the state of the art. It has been a year in which some of our more established artists have continued to make confident and well rounded works, if a little lacking in risk. Marty St James and Anne Wilson were

CUCKOO IS A little bit of life in a new world. The stage is littered with old wooden furniture; rows of dark, empty wardrobes; lines and clusters of chairs; standard lamps and stools. SHO use the furniture to work with, to sketch with, and as they silently move it around the stage, half-making scenes of drawing rooms, bedsits and fragments, one is soon struck by what a perfect raw material this junk-shop stuff is for them. Furniture is real, it inhabits the scenes of all our lives and all our social history. It can't help but resonate when pushed into new arrangements. There are things we recognise here; bits of an antiquated world; people drinking tea; men reading travel books by a fireside, feet on stools; a man so cramped up with his chair that he can't open the wardrobe door.

To their credit SHO keep their fictions as hints only. Possible narratives to which we must supply the words, the beginnings and the endings. Whilst it is rich with stories and recognisable moments from British domesticity the show remains itself. It always remains only SHO working on stage, making things, moving from one section based on improvisation to another, with a minimum of fuss.

It has a meandering, whimsical structure which is only just possible because of the monosyllabic nature of the tools of the performance. An excess of one thing — furniture — that binds the piece together. Only a cello and its occasional musical interruptions seem truly out of place and attempts to use it in the action by moving it around like the furniture seemed weak

CUCKOO

Station House Opera
Riverside Studios, London
Reviewed by
TIM ETHELLS

and half-hearted. It looked like something drafted in to enliven the proceedings and didn't really work. After you have the simple pleasure of guessing what they would do next with the objects, especially when hammers, saws and nails were produced, to push the world into still more uncharted areas, the shape of the show was unsatisfying. For some people, I'm sure, *Cuckoo* would have seemed a piece about social relationships, about personal relationships or even about a wider politics. The roots of these and other things are there. But for me, chasing my own thoughts as everyone must, through their junk shop built on quick-sand, their almost open text became an investigation of human possibilities and aspiration. Given a finite number of people, tools and objects, and a particular

class, how much can you invent is the question. What are the limits of this stage world or any other? To its credit *Cuckoo* answered that there are no limits. That we always find uses, structures and games. In the whole show not a single piece of furniture was destroyed out of frustration or anger. Things set about with saws and hammers were not so much damaged as altered to serve a new purpose. The man whose wardrobe wouldn't open sawed it in half until it did. Another nailed plank after plank onto a chair's legs until he'd made it 20 feet high, its legs ungainly and too weak to let it stand alone he supported it and let it down to rest; abandoned, sad, full of possibilities. It was a world of naives, calmly exploring with good-natured bewilderment, determined to make something of everything, of every setback. The performer whose clothes are nailed to the ground doesn't struggle or writhe, he explores the position. Trying to see perhaps what one could do nailed down like this that one could not do elsewhere.

Even at the end of the piece, when we've seen an hour and twenty minutes of rituals and inventions and the performers are moving further and further away from one another; too high on a platform; suspended in the air; a woman climbing into the darkness of a wardrobe; even then as the last light gives out on Julian Maynard-Smith, his face looking out at us in confusion, we're left with the sense that this world is just beginning — that the building and the breaking and the nailing one-another down will continue until morning comes. ●

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cont.

the British contribution to Time Code, an international experiment in co production that will also bring works by Robert Cahen (France) and Gustav Hamos (Germany) among others, to t.v. screens all over Europe this autumn. It should have been broadcast by the time Bracknell hap-

pens, but as the tape is still under wraps, the First Couple of video love comics will be absent from this year's programme. Graham Young continues to develop his idiosyncratic brand of English surrealism in the Accidents in the Home series: no 15, *Domestiques* was, for my Money (sic) the best thing in the recent series of Alter Image, and probably represents the UK's only hope of honours at the Eurofestivals this year. It is an elegant, eloquent and totally seductive work whose three short minutes stand up to repeated viewing.

But my primary concern is not to take stock of

what the better known have done over the past year, but to try to unearth new talent, or if not entirely new, then at least as yet unestablished. Last year's student prize at the festival went to Simon Robertshaw and this year he will be back with *Biometrika*, an accomplished, intelligent and innovative work that will I am sure be a talking point at the festival. Robertshaw manages the unusual double of producing a tape that deals committedly with a subject of serious social concern while at the same time defining new modes of visual presentation. Many a lesser work would earnestly advocate an argument but ultimately fail by not holding the interest of the viewer: Robertshaw is never hectoring or boring, his opinions are refreshingly uncompromising, though I fear some of his arguments would not stand up to the assault of 'informed medical opinion'.

Among this year's crop of graduating art students, Sheffield Polytechnic's Communication Arts school, where Steve Hawley now teaches video, has produced three lively talents in Liz Power, Leigh Cox and Colin Scott. Sheffield's position as the breeding ground for new video artists is rapidly becoming unassailable: in recent years it has produced Pamela Smith, Sven Harding and Mike McDowall, collectively Accident Tapes, and before them, St. John Walker and Clive Gillman, who, as *Nine Attrition Magnetic* are currently drawing attention to themselves.

At the time of writing, the deadline for entries to Bracknell is still some time away. I hope therefore that there are undiscovered treasures awaiting my attention in the August mailbag. The full festival programme will be available from The Media Centre, South Hill Park, Bracknell, Berks, from early October. ●

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