



Poles, in foyer of the National Gallery of Victoria.

Relationships between Sculpture and Performance Art

THOMAS McCULLOUGH

An American named Tom Marioni wrote on 12 July 1979 (Loeffler and Tong, 1980, p.9) "...my concept of performance art has become old fashioned... performance is sculpture action or sculpture evolved into the fourth dimension (time)". This concept, for all its simplicity or old fashionedness, is one which I have supported during the seventies also. Introducing performance artists into various Australian Sculpture Triennials and the 1976 Biennale of Sydney, caused a deal of controversy among purists who resented any live or temporal elements in exhibitions of three dimensional art. They argued that it was not "sculpture". But for me there has been a continuing fascination with the wealth of legitimate sculptural extensions that are contained or explored in many forms of performance artworks that would not be seen in static objects. Sculpture becomes a semantic problem only when one loses track of the broad direction that points some artists towards a use of three-dimensional realities for problem solving, rather than working in two-dimensional illusions.

There is a long history of various artists putting enormous energy into theatre productions, masques and street carnivals (Rubens), as well as architectural environments (Michelangelo) intended for animation by living people. Since the Industrial Revolution our society of specialists has largely denied painters, sculptors and architects the freedom to rove among their sister arts' disciplines. An early twentieth century fascination for dynamism in Italy, Germany, France and Russia, rekindled in artists a desire to mingle the differences between theatre, art and life with new technologies such as electricity, petrol engines and engineering. "Futurism" before World War I, and "Constructivism" after it, encouraged a questioning of traditional roles of movement, space and materials. "Dada" artists also mixed their media and metaphors with cabaret and street events in experiments with content and absurdist symbolism.

The involvement of people and actions in many endeavors by experimental artists before 1939 lays a firm foundation for the "happenings" in the USA and elsewhere some twenty years later. By the early sixties "performance art" was one of the terms used to cover private and public arts activities involving the presence of the artist or someone delegated by the artist, for a period of time which was designated as being the work of art itself. This ephemeral art-form often adopts pseudo-theatre devices, but is usually carefully non-theatrical in overall intention. Despite a concentration on materials, process and often strong formal arrangements, performance artworks by sculptors remain in an area of suspicion for many critics, teachers and curators.

The emphasis which most writers place on traditional categories of the visual arts perpetuates a myth that links up selected works in ways that may ignore the powerful performance art influences exerted on an artist, a style or a whole artistic attitude.

Documentation of performance art is difficult to obtain from conventional sources, so the problem is compounded. Teachers who ignore the most abundant and accessible material in their sculpture classes (i.e. the human body and its behaviour), leave a vital aspect of three-dimensional art virtually unexplored. To mimic or copy the human condition in substitute, static materials seems a curious deviation from nature, and yet we have a history of carving, modelling and casting replicas of the human body in art schools ad nauseum. My recommendation is not to discontinue a serious study of the human form in any medium in particular, but for the sculpture teacher also to act as a Pygmalion occasionally.

The following interview with "DDART" comprising two British artists who visited Australia in September-October 1982 exemplifies the relevance which a training in sculpture has for this type of public performance art. It should be clear that there are concerns and issues in their actions which could not be solved by making static sculptural objects for art galleries or as permanent public monuments. Yet their orientation, discipline and beginnings are distinctly those of sculptors rather than of street theatre, dance or entertainment as such. . .

Question — Tom McCullough

In very simple terms can you say what you are setting out to achieve when you design a new performance or construct a new sculpture for the public?

Answer — Ray Richards

Well I can apply the following statement to all of our work, and that is that what we try to do is create a pure piece of sculpture which can be animated by our taking part in its presentation. To present that pure piece of sculpture in a public way demonstrates that art can be an egalitarian thing, that it can be enjoyed by people regardless of their knowledge and on many different levels. When we work out a piece together what we are looking for is a very strong piece of sculpture. A lot of the work done will stand as sculpture, freestanding replicas. In fact in England we made a replica of a performance and entered it in a competition and it won a prize straight away, which gives you an idea of the strength of the sculptural side of our work.

Answer — Dennis De Groot

In a sense it's also about what you feel art does and what art does in a society. Ray and I both feel very strongly that the kind of work we do, call it avant garde, is very much about presenting new possibilities of the ways art can be looked at and what art can actually be. We are trying to push the boundaries that little bit further.

By pushing it into a street and the public environment, we are also pushing it into the marketplace. Hopefully it could become common currency, rather than something that tends to get shut

away in a drawing room or become a financial investment. (We are both going to Bali on the way back, which we are really excited about because there they don't have a translation of the word "art".) Probably what we are aiming for is to abolish art and get it to be like the common language of everybody.

Q. I find the range of your work very satisfying. There are, for example, elements of aesthetic beauty in moving across a British rural landscape with highly polished sculptures, and there are elements of social commentary in two men walking in unison strapped together by poles. Undoubtedly your desire to work for ordinary working-class people in the streets, rather than the so-called elite in art galleries, puts many different interpretations upon your work. I wonder if you design your repertoire of performances to be wide-ranging and nonspecific enough to have universal appeal in them? There is no narrative content in your work, and no direct social comment about a particular time and place. My response to your work sometimes is a purely formal sculptural one, at other times it is one which enjoys the eccentricity of your human behaviour in contrast to normal daily life in which the work is usually presented. What are your own priorities?

Ray: I think that we create primarily in terms of aesthetics and what we find formally pleasing — what you can do to two live human forms or what you can do with certain objects in a landscape with people. To me it all relates to people being alive and the situation, the potential situation, that we can put these sculptures where they will relate directly on a one-to-one basis with anyone who happens to see them. On top of that there are normal aesthetic considerations that any artist goes through when they are creating a piece of work, but I think they become very high with us. We are not into political narrative or storytelling, and it doesn't excite me at all. I think narrative is a very simple and facile solution. It doesn't do anything for me, but the idea of showing completely new visual possibilities to people really excites me.

Dennis: A lot has got to do with our actual working method, as well. We often start off with tremendously elaborate ideas, all based on the kind of considerations you would have in building a sculpture or painting a picture. We would start with something very complicated, very intricate, and slowly boil it down until it becomes a very very finite, simple idea. As with the *Poles*, just a pole connecting each joint from me to Ray. That is a very simple idea that would take up just one line of foolscap. Then by projecting it into a street it takes on all the implications of a strong creative gesture. This may sound a bit arrogant, like doing the Leonardo da Vinci put-down thing, but the Mona Lisa is just a woman smiling. In that it is one line, but of course it has tremendous implications, it touches things, it implies things. Most good art should be about that, about scratching the surface and revealing something completely new, new avenues, new areas, new ways of looking, new ways of seeing, just literally that, by a simple statement and by being a definitive statement also.



Blockmen, in Melbourne City Square.

Q. *Do you also enjoy, even welcome the risk involved in performing in public, as contrasted with the “safe” surroundings of an art gallery?*

Ray: I would not say either of us enjoy risk, it frightens us genuinely. But it’s exciting and unpredictable, and one has to accept that element if you are going to attempt to put art into a public situation. Trying to break down inhibitions and barriers that have existed for centuries is bound to cause a little bit of aggression.

Dennis: To take up what Ray said, I suppose we must admit that we do actually get a kick out of the fact that you are performing for an hour and the adrenalin is going and you are living right at the very nerve ends. In the course of an hour there is very little that you don’t notice and it is quite surprising how you can sense the very atmosphere. So I suppose we must admit deep down that we do actually get a bit of a kick out of it — sort of the Evel Kneivel of the art world!

Q. *Your work fulfils the aims of PITSPACE’s ArtsCircus Project even better than I hoped for. The reason for this is that your work is a community arts form without a necessary requirement of physical participation/contribution by the spectator. Total control of a performance is maintained only when the artists are carrying out the actions. What happens when a member of the public actually joins in with your performance? How do you handle that situation?*

Ray: We try to use that to enhance the performance. It is never our intention to actually involve people because it means that we are losing control of the image we want to project, so we try and cope with unexpected participants as quickly and neatly as we can without it detracting from the performance. We will use the movement of somebody's entering into the performance to alter our performance and either move away from them or move with them until they get tired of interfering or joining in with us, depending on what exactly they are doing. I mean there are so many little "tricks", for want of a better word, that one learns that nobody can tell (and that I find difficult to cite now) which come automatically to us if somebody becomes involved and we don't want them to. For instance, when they are being negative, or if somebody becomes involved and we don't want them to stay involved because it's interfering with the pureness of the image that we are putting out. You must be open to allow people a free hand without letting them take over what you are doing.

Dennis: It very much depends upon the kind of involvement — often somebody's input will be purely destructive and often as not the person who is being destructive is usually fairly disturbed anyhow. That kind of output we have to cope with particularly because it destroys the performance, it destroys the atmosphere you build up and it potentially could get very violent. So we have learned, as Ray says, through "tricks", to cope with that. But if somebody's input is very positive or very constructive, and something that in a sense is enhancing the thing, we go along with it. We actually did a performance in England in which we went into a cafe, using the *Poles*, and a little old lady gave us both cups of tea and cakes. We spent about a quarter of an hour being fed, which was something that really enhanced the performance. She enjoyed it, we enjoyed it, everybody around enjoyed it, but then again on the other hand we performed in Canterbury and got chased down the street by fifty skinheads. Now that is not something that is going to enhance the performance. It is very much "horses for courses". Generally we are not against the idea of people involving themselves as long as it's constructive and as long as it's something we feel we can play along with. Again it's about whether it does or does not destroy the performance.

Q. Watching you work in the Preston Market on Fridays for four weeks, it was apparent that you adopted a kind of "performance persona" quite different from your relaxed, shall we say normal, personalities. This at times detached you from the people all around. In my mind you were not performing at or for them, you were in fact acting out a ritual that perhaps came from within. The whole thing looked perfectly attuned to the setting in which it occurred, but you didn't rehearse the performance, nor had you even seen the market area closely before you went there. What techniques do you use to make your improvisations (as they must have been) look so convincing and planned, and your detachment so total?

Ray: I can't put my finger on any particular technique. The way that we act is defined by the objects that we wear and we try to



Poles, at Preston Market.

maximise our movements within the restrictions imposed on us by the objects/sculptures that we wear. This is what defines our “performance persona”, possible after some discussion held before the event itself. The way that we have arrived at such an empathy together in the performance situation can only really be put down to experience. We have worked long and hard for ten years together to understand each other well; both of us are tuned into being one unit, one performance artist. Dennis and I say to each other that together we make one great artist, and that is something that goes beyond rehearsal, beyond anything you can talk about. I think it is something almost akin to ESP, because we are usually totally in sympathy and know generally what the other one is going to do, and when, so that is why it looks so smooth.

Q. *Some of your performances also have, in my view, quite a deal of humor that I don't see in many performance artists' work. In some works do you consciously have humor there in an obvious form, so that in street performances anybody can get some level of enjoyment out of it? Do you in fact perform in a “serious” manner, as it were, for people in universities and tertiary art schools, and in a different manner for the people at Preston Market and the shopping centres?*

Dennis: I think that we both feel that really the answer to the question is that when we perform, we project an image or a performance which should be performed as professionally and as tightly as possible because art is about communication, in a way in which we can communicate with people. They can perceive the



Doors, in Sculpture Courtyard of the National Gallery of Victoria.

basic image, and then also the way in which that image is presented. We feel very strongly that the tightness with which we present the performance is an integral part of the sculpture. As regards humor, well, humor is part of it; we do have a kind of humorous bent to our work. But, not only humor; there's also the physical effort, the fact that we are actually working very very hard, rather than indulging in a sort of laid-back personalised mind game, in which we feel "My, this is important, I'm looking at my navel for 3½ hours"! If we did that, we would do that 3½ hours in 300 different ways, because it's about communicating; it's about presenting that image tightly, professionally and properly.

Ray: Supplemental to Dennis's answer, I think our philosophy behind the way we perform is that we can perform the same performance in essence in Preston Market, at La Trobe, outside the National Gallery, or in a school for the mentally handicapped. In each of those places it can be appreciated on different levels. It can be taken as a whacky thing or it can be taken as a stunning visual spectacle. Because we are professionally experienced performance artists we know how to use a crowd and we know that if you are in a public situation where there is liable to be antagonism, an easy way to gain acceptance is just to be slightly witty. But we don't put clown's noses on and we don't act the fool in front of the audience. To go back to the performances at P I T and La Trobe, we did those particular performances in that way because you could not do them in the street, because of people's inhibitions about exposing your body and the sort of



DDART as *The Ring*, involved in the Parachute game at Macleod Centre for Mentally Handicapped.

aggressive feedback you would get from this quite aggressive performance. You can get negative feedback from even a nonaggressive performance because certain people sometimes can't cope with it. This week we are doing a very humorous performance at P I T and La Trobe. It's the same performance we will do in the markets. But the more aggressive performance of the first week was an opportunity for DDART to "stretch out" a little and work in public in a way that we are normally restricted from working.

Q. You certainly work very hard in all your performances but the spectators would not realise that you have to keep extremely fit physically, and that you have spent many hours in the gymnasium at La Trobe. Does the idea of physical fitness enter into the performance in ritualistic ways as well as simply being able to do the job professionally? Are you preparing yourself mentally as well as physically when you are having a work-out and swimming long distances, etc?

Ray: It's not something I have thought about consciously — we must be. In England we train separately because we live in different cities and over the last year we have been training seriously. Australia is a golden opportunity for us to train together and that is why I answered the first question "Yes, we must be", because we are now able to be together a lot. When we are "working out" together it's good. In many ways the problem with England is that we are a long distance apart, in Nottingham and London. The training is kept up but not at such a high



Shadow Men, at Phillip Institute and La Trobe University.

standard as in Australia, because we are doing performances less frequently and we can afford to suffer after a performance because of lack of fitness. We can't do that here because we have got another two performances the same day, or another three performances the next day. But I think it is our policy from now on to try and maintain permanently the level of fitness we are reaching here, because it does make the work so much better. It means that you can actually do things that have you only thought about or that you have unsatisfactorily attempted; for example, to carry Dennis for a long period of time or vica versa.

Notes on Sources

DDART interview extracts (unpublished at present) were made from a transcribed sound tape recorded by Thomas McCullough, with Ray Richards and Dennis De Groot in October 1982, as part of the PITSPACE Artists-in-Residence program (supported by a grant from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council).

Exhibition Catalogues

Australian Sculpture Triennial (1981), McCullough, T., La Trobe University and Phillip Institute.

Biennale of Sydney (1976) "Recent international forms in art", McCullough, T., and Callaghan, M., Art Gallery of NSW (see also Publicity Scrapbook).

—(1979), "European dialogue", Waterlow, N., compiled by Crowley, K., Art Gallery of NSW (see also "A Commentary").

- (1982), "Vision in disbelief", Wright, W., compiled by Latos-Valier, P. and Westwater, E., Art Gallery of NSW.
- Ideas from Japan/Made in Australia* (1981), Scarlett, K., Gryphon Gallery, MSC, and VCA Gallery.
- Mildura Sculpture Triennial*, Note: 1961, 1964, 1967, 1970 catalogues have no reference to performance art.
- (1973), "Sculpturscape", McCullough, T., Mildura Arts Centre (also appendix).
- (1975), McCullough, T., MAC (see also tabloid appendix by Terry Reid and Bob Kerr).
- (1978), McCullough, T., MAC; and *Exhibition Exposition* (a follow up to the 1978 Triennial) McCullough, T.
- New Zealand Sculptors at Mildura* (1978 and 1979), A national tour of NZ public galleries for the QE2 Arts Council, Wellington, NZ.
- Unidentified data on *ACT 1*, 2 and 3 at the ANU, Canberra.

Regular overseas exhibitions, such as *Documenta* in Kassel, Germany; the *Venice Biennale* and the *Biennale Des Jeunes* in Paris all produce valuable catalogues with much performance art material in them.

Magazines

- Art Network*, (especially issues 2 and 3/4), Thorn, P. and Wolfe, R. (eds), distributed by Gordon and Gotch, Melbourne.
- Arts Melbourne*, (especially vol.1, no.4, 1976), Kiffy Rubbo and Collective, Ewing and Paton Galleries, Melbourne University.
- High Performance*, Burnham, L.F. (ed.), distributed at 240 S. Broadway, Los Angeles, California, 90012, USA.
- Studio International*, UK; *Flash Art*, Italy; *Art Forum*, USA; and *Data*, Italy... all are well known overseas magazines in Australia.
- Vision*, Marioni, T. (ed.), published by Kathan Brown, Crown Point Press, 1555 San Pablo Ave, Oakland, California, 94612, USA.

Books

- Abramovic and Ulay (1980), *Relation Work and Detour*, Idea Books, Amsterdam, Holland.
- Goldberg, R.L. (1979), *Performance: Live art 1909-present*, Thames and Hudson.
- Krauss, R.E. (1977), *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson.
- Lippard, L.R. (1973), *Six Years: The dematerialisation of the art object*, Studio Vista, London.
- Loeffler and Tong (1980), *Performance Anthology*, Contemporary Arts Press, San Francisco.
- Rinke, K. (1976), *Ex-hi-bi-tion*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, United Kingdom.
- (1972), *Time Space Body Transformations*, Adriani, G. (ed.), Du Mont International.
- Sturgeon, G. (1978), *The Development of Australian Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson.



DDART in Derbyshire Peak district (UK). *Cube Move* 1981 — 12 miles with 2½ cwt aluminium in six days.