

Collaboration: Stuart Brisley and Ken McMullen

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Performance art is by its nature ephemeral. Each piece of work is a process in time which can never be precisely recaptured, this being a quality which performance art shares with other events on the stage and on the concert platform. The process can be documented by still photography which isolates certain moments in the flow of events but in so doing may remove ambiguities, suppress readings and simplify the metaphor which is the essence of the performance. Film (or video), on the other hand, has the virtue of preserving the flow of events in time and thereby allowing the work to unfold its layers of meaning. It would be naive, however, to believe that film or videotape of a performance is an unproblematic document of the event. The framing of the shots, the length of the takes, the camera angle, all transform the event, imposing on it a formal visual quality which is unlikely to be congruent with the experience of any member of the audience. There is, moreover, the familiar problem of the effect on the performers of their knowledge that a camera is present – knowledge which must in all cases, lead to an interplay, voluntary or involuntary, between performer and camera. Beyond such collaboration there may be more important relationships between camera operators and performers, ranging from conflict and tension to close partnership that extends beyond the performance to joint work on the recorded images. Such a partnership Stuart Brisley and Ken McMullen have evolved over the years.

Their collaboration goes back to 1972 to an early work by Brisley, *Arbeit Macht Frei* (the grim, lying words inscribed by the Nazis over the gates of the concentration camp at Dachau). This was a tense piece of work in which they had not yet solved the interplay of the roles of film-maker and artist or fully understood the difference between working with a camera as opposed to working for a camera. The process was taken a stage further in *Bleakness* in which filming and refilming were used to produce a work based on the performance but one which could claim – because of the deliberate manipulation of the image – to be considered as more than a record; rather as an amalgam of the skills of two artists producing a work in its own right.

In 1975 came McMullen's film *Resistance* in which Stuart Brisley played an important part. This is an extraordinary (and successful) attempt by artists too young to have any direct knowledge of European resistance movements to explore the nature of that experience – not by any attempt at historical reconstruction but by the creation of what they describe as 'equivalences'. A number of important elements fed into the work of improvisation which lies at the heart of the film: the

exploration of group dynamics, Brisley's experiences at Hornsey in 1968 and his period of working as a labourer. There was, too, the close understanding between McMullen as director and Brisley (and other members of the cast – notably Marc Chaimowicz), which allowed what they define as 'sub-conscious engineering' of situations and the exploitation of 'disguised accidents'. The combination of prolonged and sometimes painful improvisation and documentary footage taken during the liberation of Paris produced a work of great power and essential truthfulness.

McMullen's film of *Between*, a piece of work performed over forty-eight hours in Amsterdam last year shows how their collaboration has developed. The basic essential was that Brisley and Iain Robertson were involved in Sisyphean labour and struggle on an inclined plane, naked except for a few protective wrappings. Here the shots are framed from angles to which the spectator has no access; the camera positions are fixed – on a pile of bricks, for instance – so that the performers pass in and out of frame, sometimes marginalised, sometimes absent, sometimes dominating the screen. The consciousness of the performers of the camera's presence and their knowledge of the likely field of view led to a method of working whereby the end result transcends any purely documentary impulse. Here the camera is the full partner of the performers. So it is with *Approaches to Learning* a formal, violent balletic duo by Brisley and Robertson, which is much more than a record of the profilmic event. The duo is a performance in its own right but the rearrangement of events in the editing process, the freezing of shots to reinforce an image, produce an experience in the viewer which is related to but different from the original event.

Brisley and McMullen have since been working on the filming of work by East European performers, which they see as being critical of the process of industrialisation as applied to what were peasant communities (as well as of social controls), and the filming of folk ceremonies in Britain. Their work on the Padstow Hobby Hoss ceremony in which aerial shots of the event are combined with rostrum work on stills of the procession, draws on their experience of filming events which lack the Hobby Hoss's long history and deep roots. So too does their filming of the Haxey Hood, a ritual scrimmage in Lincolnshire, in which the shooting and editing reinforce the impression of an elemental struggle in the cold and dark of the flat landscape. These are strong images which raise questions about the nature of ritual and of its obstinate survival in communities today.