THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE PERFORMER

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Art performance doesn't sit easily in the frame of the visual arts. It expresses complementary energies awkwardly by remaining tangential to the central canons of visual art. It is made more complex by intervening in the other arts, e.g., literature, music, dance, etc.

Art performance is the one component of the complexion of art where the questions of material production and reification are problematised. However, all art works exist in time. The issue is not one of the ephemeral as opposed to the permanent. Nothing is forever. It is the question of the relative durations of the impermanent. A performance, for example, lives in the moments of its production. A purist approach might accept this condition. But the notorious faculty of memory will take over as a substantial agent of interpretation, to perpetuate, to develop, or to shape shift. Memory is not a stable factor in art or life. The mind is not fully known, the brain itself is so complex as to resist being entirely known scientifically. As we know more so we realise how little we do know. On the face of it photography seems to afford some relief to the dilemma of leaving the consideration of performance to memory, at a price. It is reasonable to try to remain true to the unique event, in regard to truth and authenticity. However even if an experience of performance does stay in memory it is subject to the vagaries of being partial, biased, or prejudiced, and limited. In the course of time, memories shrivel to become paper thin.

The photograph initially enters as an aide memoire. An adjunct which can block the process of selective remembering and crucial forgetting. In practical terms there is a need to have some sort of tangible evidence that such and such did take place, to have records. Once the question is raised the photograph can become an invaluable adjunct to the performance event. Its significant entry as record, as interpretation, offers another dimension. It releases the performance from the tyranny of being held in the time of its revelation. It extends duration and opens the performance to another life albeit one that is different.

Alice Maude-Roxby's initial interest in the subject grew from her fascination with photographs of performer Gina Pane's activities, and an idea that knowing the motivations and processes of the photographer might open up other considerations of the performance. I had been working with photographers since the latter part of the sixties before I came into contact with Leslie Haslam in West Berlin in 1973. I was awarded a

Stuart Brisley, *Bath Works*, 1974, photograph by Leslie Haslam.

DAAD Artists Berlin Fellowship in 1973–74. Leslie had come to West Berlin a few years earlier after two years travel in Central and South America. Prior to that he was living and working in Vancouver. He'd studied graphics in Vancouver and had become proficient as a photographer.

We did a few things together in West Berlin including one of the very few actions made specifically for the camera entitled *Bathworks*. It was apparent from the beginning of our collaborations that Leslie was both amenable to and at the same time had clear ideas as to how performance might be approached through the camera. As our working relationship proceeded other factors came into play which enhanced the role of photographer.

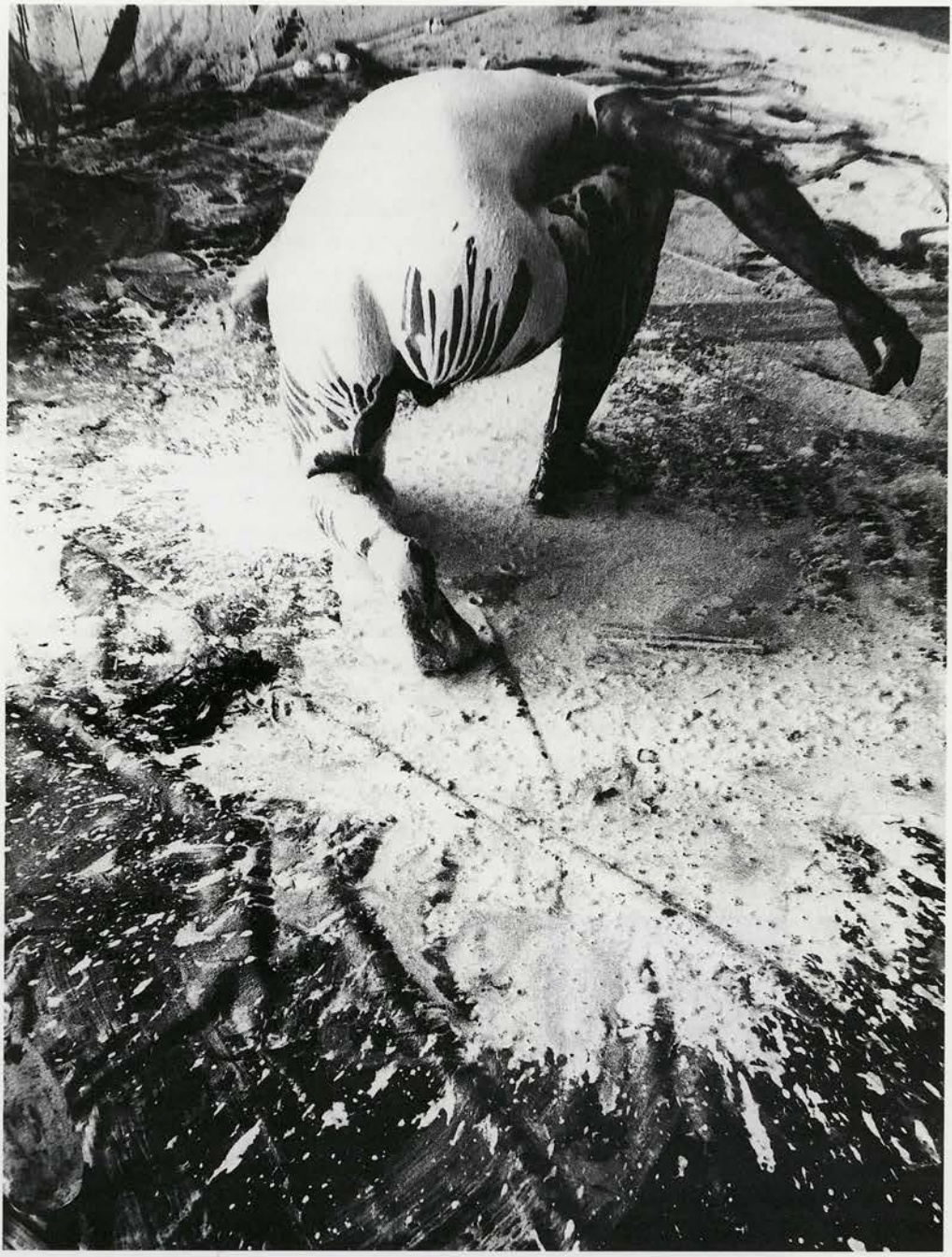
As I came to know Leslie I realised that he was firstly a pragmatist with a stubborn sense of independence even to his own detriment. He was an anti-bourgeois outsider who refused, for example, to subscribe to the usual notions of career development. He was entrepreneurial in a way, in advance of his time. The camera was a tool in some of this but not all of it. He didn't subscribe to any utopian vision of life. His pragmatism was always to the fore, as it had to be to find the means of survival. Towards the end of his relatively short life he established himself as photographer working in the film industry and became financially secure. The last film he worked on was *The Pianist* by Polanski. In a way the financial stability he finally established didn't suit him. Maya Brisley recalls opening a cupboard in his apartment to find a virtual sea of cameras, not unlike her own extensive library. It is reminiscent of the myths told about the abstract expressionists in New York who becoming suddenly wealthy in

middle age apparently responded by buying numbers of items of the same commodity. The dream come true, dies.

Leslie's contribution to the work we did together was to accept and participate in most of the aspects of performance. The only thing he didn't do was to perform. And his entrepreneurial tendencies were directed elsewhere. He seemed to enjoy being part of something which didn't subscribe to the tacit imperatives of common sense. The camera was a tool never far from his hands like a third hand. He had a remarkable ability to shrink into anonymity when using the camera. As a performer I was never aware of what he was doing or even where he was even though we would have discussed what he would do to our satisfaction. I couldn't respond in like fashion as there is a large dimension of the unknown in performance. In most of our work together when I looked at the images he had produced I had a strong sense of recognition. He almost always found images which complemented my own sense of what I was doing. Remember, as a performer one is inside the performance in a way working blind while simultaneously aware of the projection, as performance in the making. Latterly we lost that essential connection and the images were less interesting. There are a number of reasons for that. Suffice to say we weren't able to spend time together to find areas of mutual interest and our relationship continued solely on a friendly basis.

Leslie had a range of practical skills and attributes. He was a highly competent carpenter and a good organiser as his business ventures show. Maya Brisley's view of his work with me is informed by her own experience: an understanding of what it means to be foreign, an outsider. Her view of his ability to shrink into anonymity with the camera extends to his life in West Berlin with its surrounding wall, and after the Wall came

Photograph of Leslie Haslam.



Stuart Brisley, *Moments of Decision/Indecision*, Warsaw, 1975, photograph by Leslie Haslam.

down as being typical of the experience of exile in the larger Berlin.

This was complicated by Leslie's own sense of himself. He lived in Germany for thirty or so years and never became a permanent resident. In that sense he didn't formally contribute to the society but was part of its subculture, which is of course to make another kind of contribution. He saw himself as being essentially English in a way, which became increasingly dated because in effect he did not live in England for forty or more years before his untimely death. And while he had no intention of becoming a German national he also didn't seriously consider living in England, or if he did it didn't bear fruit. He was an expatriate for life. This subscription to being assertively English, and living in a temporary fashion permanently in a foreign country confined him and the manner of his thought to a marginality which Maya Brisley asserts is a common experience of exile. He was acutely aware that he was a foreigner. He was in voluntary exile and his idea of home was that of a land he chose not to live in. She also sees that our collaborations offered Leslie a temporary sense of freedom and of belonging. In Maya's view the photographs which were the outcome of Leslie's collaborations with my performances are direct and objective, confirming her view of him as an outsider, or a stray as she described it. The camera acts as a shield or mask. The face is hidden by the machine. The view through the machine is transformed by the intricacies of the lens. It removes the photographer from experience as being part of the scene to one of being outside looking in or looking on. It suggests that the camera in its way is a reflection of the way Leslie Haslam chose to live. I have taken Alice Maude-Roxby's initial interest in the photographer to try to find out what might inform Leslie Haslam's photographs of performances we made together.

Stuart Brisley's account of *Moments of Decision/Indecision*, 1975, as published in *Studio International* v191, January 1976, pp 65–66.

Moments of Decision/Indecision
Gallery Studio, Warsaw, August 1975
Photographer Leslie Haslam

On the first day before the beginning of the work the figure's head was shaved to reduce the sense of personality and to increase the feeling of nakedness. At the beginning of work each day the figure was dressed in a greyish shirt and trousers. As soon as the clothes were covered with paint, and were wet, they were removed. When clothed the figure, although separated by the work, was related to the viewers in the sense that generally he was as they were – dressed in accordance with social requirements. The naked state of the figure induced a more acute sense of distance or separation between the figure and the viewers but a closer relationship between the figure, the wall, the floor, the paint, etc. This sense of distance was required so that a distinction could be made between like circumstances and the circumstances of an art process involving a live person. Bowls of black and white paint were strategically placed on the floor – two bowls of white and black paint placed opposite each other towards the front of the floor area, and two placed towards the wall at the back.

Each day's activity began with the figure placing one foot in black paint, one in white paint, likewise with the hands. This image established the visual contradiction, which was itself a condition of the work, of which there was no final resolution. After the clothes were removed, the sense of involvement in the process increased. When the paint covered the eyes, and the figure was unable to see for the duration of the work, the order of the 'normal' perceptions of space-distance and gravity was subtly changed. The figure demonstrated this limited sense of a 'release' by attempting to climb the wall, as part of the process of painting the wall. No signs were made in paint by the figure: the images that were left on the wall were largely involuntary marks, made by bodily contact and by chance.

The collaborator (Haslam) photographed the work at intervals using flashlight, which also gave a repetitive rhythm to the process. He directed the blind figure, on request, to the front, back and middle of the space, and to the bowls of black and white paint placed on the floor. The collaborator became the eyes of the figure. The figure sensed the space and distances in which the action took place, in order to change and develop the work. He moved between the floor and the wall, from the floor onto the wall, to the floor, between the black and white areas in the space, from black into white and from white into black. He changed black areas into white areas, white areas into black areas and was himself changed from white into black into grey at regular intervals.

In this work a series of paradoxical situations established themselves. The resolution could only take place within those people who came to see it. Given the fact that *Moments of Decision/Indecision* Warsaw only existed in the time/space in which it took place; in order to extend the work beyond that time/space, it was necessary to obtain information and material from the process. The form of information needed (in this case photography) required the collaboration of another person. Such a person should have a specific understanding of the nature of the activity, and be independent in terms of his own abilities to be able to make clear decisions in relation to the work in process. The activity itself changes from one state of reality into another. What is revealed through the process of photography are 'moments of decision', selected from the activity by the person using the camera. The long series of changing states of the actual process are termed 'moments of indecision'. The need for collaboration is determined by the notion of the potentiality of a continual process leading from one state of the work to another until the work is finally resolved or dies, e.g., action – photography – film – book. It generates a democratic situation in which there is an interchange of responsibility leading to the resolution of the work in its various forms. This notion of a democratic collaboration is a creative aspect of the process, and is influential in determining the form, feeling and outcome of the original concept.