

## Richard Layzell

Performance, as McLuhan said about television, leaves little to the imagination. He was comparing it to the radio -- we can't so easily compare performance to live visual art. We have to do a sort of reverse disappearing trick -- did the performer really mean to do that? We do not have the leisure to peruse, to conjecture, to take little mental voyages around the circumference of the artist's intentions as we do with painting or sculpture. There is plenty of scope for the live artist to present us with a *fait accompli*, to cover up intention with artifice, to do the job for the audience, fill in the gaps, help the perception along. If this temptation is resisted successfully the artist is accused of obscurity. If not, the temptation to please, to make easier, to titillate a bit, if indulged fully will point to the booming vacuous world of box office returns, the *theatre*, where artists are slaves to the fickle public (or at least some publicist's projected fantasy of it).

Which is why Performance, the visual art end of it, is so carefully cordoned off by artists and critics alike. One step over the line, one gesture to the audience's perception of live art invokes the dread spirit of empty applause, the painted clown, the performing seal. One artist, Richard Layzell, with all the "correct" Art School credentials, background and solid grounding in visual art, risked crossing that line and bringing down the wrath of his contemporaries when, a few years ago he took a course in mime and improvisation -- Layzell, after years of work in sculpture, drawing and film, has since then been obsessively, but consciously concerned with the audience's perception of his live work.

Oddly enough, after early experiments in the sixties (he studied at the Slade with people like Marc Chaimowicz and was taught by Stuart Brisley; he had given up live work. Having done

work on environmental sculptures, sewing together sections of fruit and vegetables which he called graftings, he moved on to do what were then known as events. During one such event (NNYM) in Regents Park he suddenly felt that it was all too self-

Indulgent - "A person walked past me in the rain and I wished he wasn't there." So he went into what some might call a self-imposed wilderness, for seven years concerning himself with mainly conventional work in the visual arts. Then, at the same time as the Butlers Wharf phenomenon was beginning to flourish in 1978 he did the workshops, came back into performance work with a piece entitled "Line Flying", and put himself in a more or less unstoppable path to the recent prolific, high energy, high risk years of performances and Video work that no one around that area can fail to have noticed; approve or not.

Performance artists, like everyone else, have limits and one of them seems to be that what they do can only be charged with meaning and immediate transmittable relevance for short bursts in their career. After that it is fair game for the art historians, the documentation, the legends. Chris Burden could only shoot himself once, Judy Chicago could only have put together one Dinner Party, (but which still exists), Stuart Brisley could only move on to less adrenalin-exacting tasks (the hunter becomes gatherer in his recent ICA piece) Nuttall and the Boys could only have made their drunken grass roots showbiz outrageous waves at a certain time in those northern towns (an anachronism no longer tolerated). Those who are wise, wise down, slow up or burn out They wait for the next opportunity to walk the conceptual tightrope in the glare of the high-expectation critical spotlight' if it ever comes again in their lifetime.



It is therefore exciting to come across by accident, an artist at a high peak in that ephemeral medium of performance. It's usually a case of the one that got away; nine times out of ten one comes across people at the fag end of their work attracting a public which is drawn by previous notoriety and mystique—only to drift away disappointed and confused (maybe to cultivate a reinforced prejudice against performance itself. But with Richard Layzell, firing away most cylinders, it would seem, with a whole series of closely time-linked performances starting with "What do you mean by that?", and ending with the satisfyingly titled "That's what I mean", there is a sense that he has been caught at his best.

A series of coincidences led me to see Layzell for the first time quite unintentionally the first in the series—What do you mean by That?, which was at Air Gallery as part of the Video at Air season organised by London Video Arts. Basically concerned with semantics, it was dismissed from that point of view by Keith Frake in Performance No. 10 in that it included all the rubric essential for a serious investigation of meaning construction but fell hopelessly into the old bourgeois cant that perpetuates the notion that it is the individual who makes meaning. I disagree. Although Layzell managed in a nervy 'electric way' to slowly bring the whole audience into his personal feeling of clogged communications groping out of a symbol-blindness that could almost cornily be compared to a rebirth experience; he was not an individual making meaning but was himself being reconstructed by the programmed sequence of video images combined by the random series of objects (ordained by dice) themselves projecting their essence, hammering their symbolic nature on to the flesh of a performance

artist. There was, if you like something akin to a controlled *possession* by these things, these apples, these dice. What at first seemed a standard conceptual exercise for myself, a rather inconvenienced critic who was thinking of leaving at the earliest decent opportunity was transformed slowly into a gripping experience involving most of the public present. So much so that Layzell, once made coherent by his gradual consumption of a symbol-structure, was able to manipulate, to play on the expectations of those in the room in a way that seemed fraught with risk. "That's the end", he announced. No it's not. Yes it is. No it's not. The relation ship had changed. Layzell talked normally now but no one trusted him. His flirtation with incoherence with temporal impotence became public and the audience was slowly involved in the risks. He paced the room with a psychotic innocence and forced those in the room to examine their preconceptions. The performance ended on an undecided note, as many of them seem to do. He said later that he felt that the piece had produced sadness.

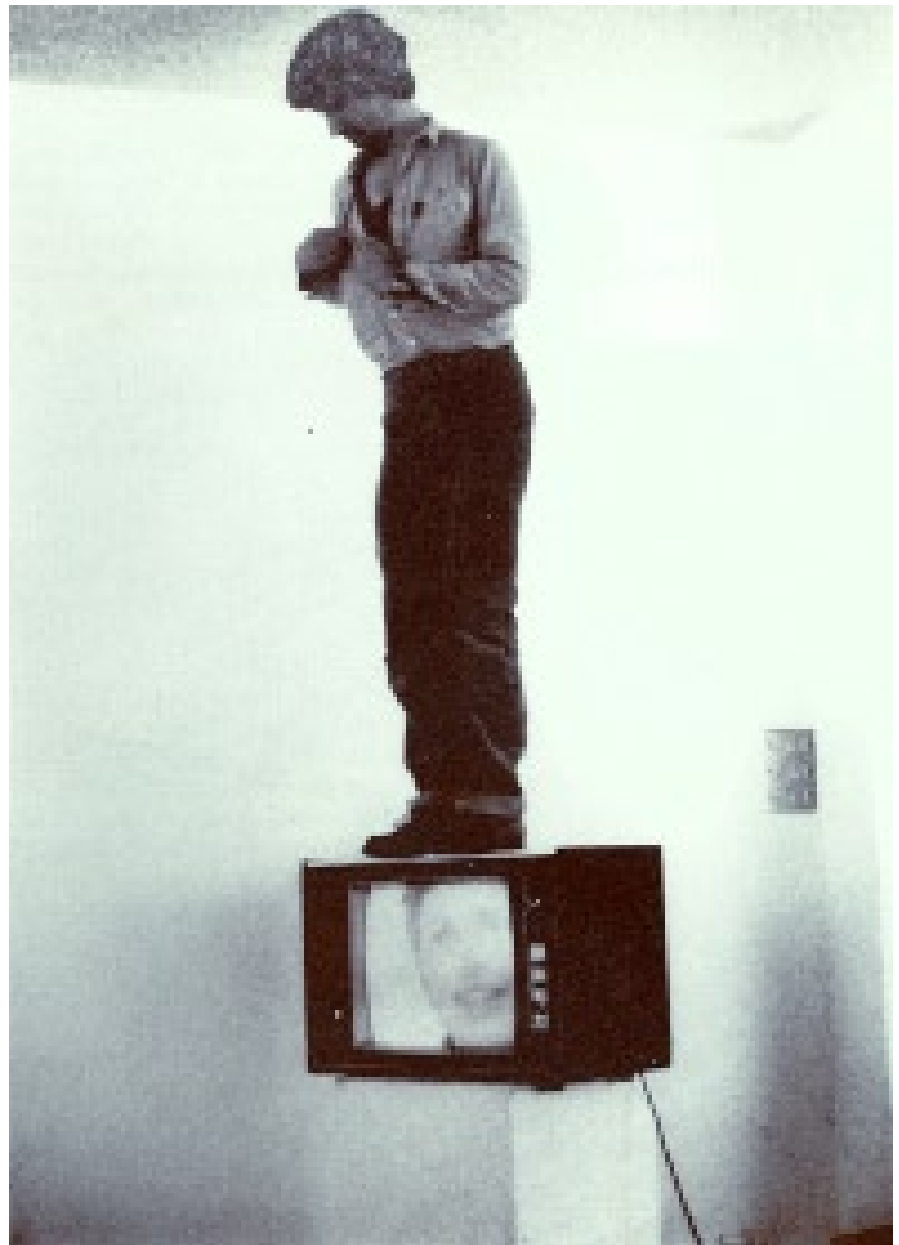
But Layzell's critics do have a basis for their uneasiness, and he himself admits that he is unsure about the way in which his own personal character strongly conditions a performance. He is able to empty himself to be a tool of a strictly imposed time limit or the foil of random events as he does in later performances, but there is a strong delinquent element, flashes of pure personality, that fuels his sudden ability to make the public feel vulnerable. The key may be in the way he is able to suddenly strip down all the barriers -- to present a blatantly vulnerable self-image. Some are suspicious -- is he really doing this, or is it an actor's trick? After seeing three separate performances, I would say there are no tricks involved.... his brief

experience with mime worked simply as a trigger to release something that was already there. His vulnerability... he's always being asked for money in the streets (and he always gives it, apparently) indicates a realtime basis to his work. During some of his performance preparations, for example, he says he dreams of nothing but that performance for the whole duration. And when talking to him one gets the contradictory feeling of a nice "rational chap" who just occasionally reveals the look of one who is haunted by his actions.

He feels, he says, a responsibility towards those who come and see him. After the "sadness" produced by "What...", he decides to follow up with a piece called "Hooray", a deliberately positive work with a celebration of colour, sound, movement, primitive art, himself. The audience came in in the dark with the TV switched on – air and musak playing. Using a torch he directed them to their seats, cinema-style, the chairs arranged in rows in the centre of the room. An audio tape played with the sound of space invaders, the now familiar concrete buzzes becoming one single hum. Pure colour came on the video screen fading from red to yellow to blue. Hovering around the edges of the audience Layzell started to put into motion a crude, unseen programme of sensations. Starting with an audio joke using a slide projector – clicking slides monotonously lecturewise he started to syncopate with wooden blocks clacking together. He then moved around the audience with the blocks in the dark and the joke started to become threat, the aggressive clacking putting people on edge. Then water sprayed from a hydrator, literally cooled people off and renewed the sense of a joke as people slowly got wet. Then threat once more. Marbles thrown across the audience landing on the floor deafeningly. This time there was no relief when they were followed by ping pong balls. Again, it was something, in a "quirk" of Layzell's innocent-psychotic nature that put a whiff of fear into the air, as effective an implied physical threat as when Keith James once walked around a pitch black room with a Black&Decker drill (Action Space 1976). Layzell switched on the light, a retina-scorching experience after 20 minutes of darkness, and calmly started to bring himself into the experience where previously he had been an operator. He started making small sounds relating to things in the room and then to the room itself. He then painted his face red and blue and drew a circle of string around the audience. Gaining coherence, he then read slowly from a Ladybird Book called SHAPES. He then talked on random subjects for five minutes, and finished the performance. (The talk was intended to have no meaning—but feeling a sense of

relief, people tended to find the speech amusing). The main thing he felt was that people came out feeling good. In this case he had deliberately contrived it to be so, in an almost theatrical sense, but clearly for his satisfaction, or for this stage in his series of work. The audience themselves had been put through a purifying process.

"Conversations", the final work I saw, was for him the most important work to date, and was certainly the work where most was left up to chance. Again, it involved Layzell handing out his personality on a plate, as it were, to the public. I suppose that what distinguishes him in his ability to actually do this without being pretentious, obscure, dull or just plain loony is his ability to hold a fine line while stripping all safeguards down to the bone in a way that clearly embarrasses the average angst ridden, secretive artist. In "Conversations", he spent the day in the Acme Gallery just talking to people with a video camera – in the evening performance the results were roughly presented with an added commentary on top of the sound track, by Layzell. His disturbing frankness added several dimensions to what were, on the face of it, reams of grey indistinct video garbage. His intuitive actions during the day gave results that looked like a mixture of sloppiness and a silly version of the avant-garde home-movie pictures of feet, noses, elbows etc. But it later transpired that what Layzell had been doing was this: Someone would say "I don't want to be filmed", and Layzell would then say "Alright, can I just film your shoes, gloves, etc." Amazingly, they'd agree, and expressive aspects of the shy visitor would emerge, along with Layzell's description of minutiae, that would never be revealed with a straight recording.





Both "What.. " and "Hooray" were relatively carefully structured, but "Conversations", literally was constructed out of totally informal moments. This informality could threaten the nature of the work; it could also threaten Layzell's seriousness of intent, and he came perilously close to demystification out of existence, where the audience began to overtake Layzell in the informality stakes. He would be talking, and people would be laughing and throwing comments back, when he would suddenly stand on one leg on a chair while carrying on as normal, or stand on the monitor. We got the flash of strangeness, the threat of madness, but somehow the rarefied atmosphere of previous performances was not there.

It was simply taken for granted that he would do things like that, that this was within the rules. But then, there was also a group feeling of a shared experiment, of a scientific collaboration. This can be an important feeling. All too often it can become obvious that a performance artist is engaged on some private experiment on his or her perceptions, consciousness etc., and is somehow incidentally doing it in public. It is all very well not to expect the artist to entertain or explain, but it can be hard going if the audience is totally excluded from the work, that its being there is a mere adjunct, a condition to the work being performed in the gallery, or getting a grant, or whatever. With Layzell's experiments, you are somehow in there with him, often against your will, but on the night I saw "Conversations", there was a full feeling of consent among the audience. That being said, the following night, he went on to impose a

different regime by taking away all the chairs and the audience automatically lined the walls as if, once more, expecting a psychological attack from Layzell.

But Layzell's attacks (for this indeed is what they can seem) are never direct. They always assume an interest in the work. Instead he attacks you by exposing himself. People that know him say "How can you just stand there and reveal your personality like that?", Face to face with his uncertainties, his indecisiveness, his occasional madnesses, they know that watching him can only rebound on them. His doubts are their doubts, he is making something out of nothing in the same way as his fellow artists.... but he is laying the process on the table for all to see. His actions are actions involving real risks, and that is the way we get a glimpse of what all performance should be about. His ability to communicate what others have to hold back for fear of losing it or burning out is frighteningly and devastatingly clear.

So, what price artifice, what price the infliction of strong personality on the live artform? Will Layzell find himself simply pushed over to the theatrical side by the rigorists and the structuralists of the performance art world? Or can it be that his ability to make the choice, to choose his own path between concern for an audience and making them sweat, making them work for an understanding of the work, will prove an example for us all? For he has certainly, once set on that road, lost no time in exploring those issues, and now it simply remains to be seen whether he can get his point across before he, too, burns out.

Rob La Frenais

### Richard Layzell: Performances

- 1969 Yellow Man — Collegiate Theatre  
Black Room 1 — Slade School.
- 1970 NNYN – Collegiate Theatre and Regents Park
- 1971 Black Room 2 – Slade School
- 1972 Figure/Struture – Holly Lodge Gardens, Highgate
- 1973 Working Towards – Slade School
- 1978 Line Flying – 2B Butlers Wharf, London.
- 1979 Normality Performance – Woverhampton Polytechnic  
Improvisation – Basement Group, Nescastle.  
Steps – Spectro, Newcastle.  
Backwards, Forwards – Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh  
Lining-Up – South Hill Park, Bracknell.
- 1980 Twitch – Coventry Events Week and Basement Group, Newcastle.  
Hi – NATFHE Conference, London.  
What do you ment by That? – Air Gallery (LVA)
- 1981 Hooray – Air Gallery  
Conversations – Acme Gallery  
Fish and Chips – Art and the Sea, Sutherland and Liverpool  
That's What I Mean – Brighton Polytechnic.

'Floor' Videotape 1980

