



Images: Alastair MacLennan. Photographs: Arto Pölus (left), Manuel Vason (background: pages 7 and 8) and Nathan Walker (background: pages 9 and 10).

ARTICLE | ALASTAIR MACLENNAN

PROCEEDING... SEEKING... OCCURRING

‘Sometimes, when performers work together, simultaneously, with no single, pre-written script, text or storyline to interpret or represent, they “find” things unexpectedly being evidenced “in the moment” of performing, in the presence of encounter, which couldn’t be pre-conceived of, pre-written in, or pre-coded in, script.’

‘On reflection, some of these unexpected findings can become starting points, or triggers, for whole new works.’

Zygmunt Bauman writes that we live in ‘liquid modern times’. In a world in which globalization is on the edge of everybody’s mind, we are, he writes, ‘by design or default, on the move. We are on the move even if, physically we stay put’. Yet how can this be? How can we be simultaneously stationary and on the move?

On Saturday 15th June this year I attended Northern Irish artist, Alastair MacLennan’s most recent work, *Note Tone*, an event which caused me to think of this apparent paradox and its relationship to the act of artistic creativity. Post-performance, I met Alastair for a drink and we discussed his work.

Performed at York St John University, *Note Tone* was a twelve-hour performance-art installation, the latest in the live, time-based performance series Action Art Now.

Action Art Now is facilitated and curated in and around York by Nathan Walker and Victoria Gray of OUI Performance.

In *Note Tone*, Alastair, alongside twelve other performers, gathered from the staff and students of YSJU, used a combination of pre-selected materials to create a moving, ever-transforming piece of art. What one might call an ‘actuation’ – rather than an installation –

formed by the objects and people present in that space, at that time.

Before the performance started, participants were asked to bring six materials: two they felt positively about, two they were indifferent to and two he or she actively disliked.

Along with Alastair’s twelve pre-positioned baths, compost, water, chairs and garbage bags these became the pre-selected materials that would form the stimulus for the happenings within the performance and were introduced to all participants before the event began. The materials varied between plasticine, rope, an array of paper and a pottery owl. Each participant could use any of this total assemblage of materials as long as they did so respectfully.

Throughout the performance I noticed that certain objects produced certain creative patterns. For instance, rope often became a skipping rope, chairs were regularly used to sit on, soil was frequently used to bury.

After the performance I discussed with Alastair whether it was intentional that these objects had easily accessible or universal semiotic qualities. He said:

'It was, in part, coincidence, that the objects had clear connotative functions; but this worked well, as these familiar patterns acted as a platform from which to create more complex actions.'

The atmosphere created in *Note Tone* was largely the result of the performers' total immersion in the process. Each had time to develop a persona or a presence in the space which would carry them through the duration. These personae, combined with the silence of the performance – not speaking unless 'utterly' necessary – were maintained throughout the twelve hours. Even their meals – which took place in an adjacent room – were to be regarded as part of the performance.

Many moments within the performance – and indeed the stylistic qualities of *Note Tone* as a whole – were reminiscent of the work of Black Market International, of which Alastair is a member. Consisting of internationally renowned artists, BMI have been performing in venues globally since 1985. As a collective, BMI is a working title under which members come together to create fundamental moments that represent

and reflect life in a pre-determined location; their job, to unearth why and how.

It was this combination that seemed so familiar to me when watching *Note Tone*. However, recognising that this work wasn't that of BMI, I was interested in hearing what it was, exactly, that made *Note Tone* different. In response, Alastair commented:

'This work has never been made before. I was present, as I have been in many Black Market International performances. However, in this case I was able to pre-set a visual installation inside the space. Similarly, I was able to provide the participating performers with procedural suggestions and information before the performance started; and gave each an envelope, containing 12 non-prescriptive statements.

'When a small bell rang every hour, one of the statements would be randomly selected by each participant, to effect his/her action during that hour.'

It was Alastair who had sole control over the bell and it was Alastair who had control of the time, being the only performer allowed a watch. His own performance was at once generous and austere, as he moved between the other performers, making offerings of twigs and threads of string. Above all, he was a facilitator, his simple presence invoking both stillness – for he stayed within a single and characteristic pattern of activity and, indeed within the same space – and fluidity – for he moved freely between performers, providing stimuli for their own shifting patterns. In doing so he drew these otherwise opposite trends together, embodying what I believe to be the perfect human answer to Bauman's contemporary, globalised world.

'It was crucially important to move beyond binary 'either, or' thinking in order to embrace a holistic, 'both, and' approach to creativity.'

The ability to stay still whilst moving was characteristic and overridingly important about *Note Tone*. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, none of the other performers mastered this technique as well as Alastair, as it a facet of his distinct style of performance. Yet, this, quite possibly was what made the performance so interesting. It was an

exploration and a working through not only for the performers but for those who witnessed them take part in the process. As Alastair asserted:

'To me performance is a way of sharing creativity – in process and in trust. During performance, I welcome my audience to join in the immersion that I feel. After all – it is entirely possible for passive viewers to transition into active participants since, as living beings, we all breathe air together, simultaneously.'

Alastair MacLennan plans to continue to develop *Note Tone* in 2013.

OUI Performance will continue to curate live time based work in venues in and around York, throughout 2013, starting with their latest piece entitled 'Sink or Swim'.

Words: Mercedes Cragg