

CHELSEA Space, London, UK

A retrospective is by definition a backward glance: the culmination, postscript or appendage to a prolific career. For an artist working with Conceptual practices and performance it is also inevitably a reconstruction of sorts, one based on documentary material or re-enactments of past events. Yet these presentations are inevitably haunted by their former manifestations, the latter version a ghost of its former incarnation. Bruce McLean's 'Process Progress Project Archive' declared itself a 'process-spective', posing the question of how work can be re-presented when that backward glance is off-limits.

McLean's 1972 Tate retrospective 'King for a Day' lasted for just one day: 11 March. Although it was undoubtedly less fleeting, 'Process Progress Projects Archive' managed to retain the spirit of the former show by changing the contents of the exhibition on a weekly basis. Each episode took a different aspect of McLean's *oeuvre* as its subject, from painting to architecture or books. At first sight this division seemed somewhat misguided, obfuscating McLean's delightfully promiscuous poaching of media by staging each activity as an autonomous one. Thankfully this structure was not as rigid as it first appeared, with each instalment betraying

traces of the former as well as packing cases laden with the promise of what was coming next. Continuity was also provided by items that were on display for the duration: a waggish photograph *Installation for a Specific Part of the Body: Mouth* (1972), depicting an irrepressibly youthful McLean smoking a cigarette, formed an abridgement of sorts. The final week, 'Film/Sound/Stripes and Everything', also gave the opportunity to view all McLean's ventures side by side. The dirty twisted metal of *2 Part Found Sculpture* (1967) was displayed to reveal surprisingly intricate formal complexities; its confounding contortions approximated the entangled brushstrokes and gouged out paintwork of paintings from the 1980s.

The element most notably absent from 'Process Progress Projects Archive' was that of sculpture. McLean's frequently-noted rejection of his training in the medium under Anthony Caro and Phillip King at St Martin's School of Art was here manifest in documentation of early works such as *Rockscape Piece* (1969). A 1980s' London Weekend Television documentary on McLean's work, showing in the entrance to the space, provided a testament to these concerns; McLean's discussion of *Pose Work for Plinths I* (1971) revealed his spirited scorn for Henry Moore: 'it always amused me the way those figures fell onto a plinth.' Yet works that date

Bruce McLean
'Process Progress
Projects Archive'
2006
Video still (from
documentation by
Eddie Farrell)



from even after McLean's decision to 'give up art' in 1972 still attest to his education. Photographs and carefully contrived plans for his collaborative performance group 'Nice Style', the first ever 'pose band', show a considered employment of both form and space. The 'Nice Style' enterprise dedicated to the 'problems of performance and the quest for the perfect pose' and described at the time as 'a cross between the society slicker and the TV ad action man of the kind who delivers the chocolates against all the odds', made evident a dynamic interaction of all possible media put to work. Despite the apparently infinite array of art work on offer, the logic of this exhibition was ultimately one of performance, with the weekly reinstallation acting as a showcase: every Saturday the glass-fronted gallery played host to the man himself, encasing the ongoing proceedings vitrine-like inside.

Yet the performative impulse of McLean's work was not simply presented by 'Project Process Project Archive' but rather acted out in the exhibition itself. Recent re-enactments of performance pieces have had decidedly mixed results, but the ever-changing nature of the show and the necessary restaging of its installation were decisive in the successful representation of McLean's project as a whole. The exhibition not only put early works on view but also reproduced them to create new work that rethought these previous preoccupations: the ladder used in his Duveen Gallery performance recurs in paintings as well as providing the title of a book produced with Mel Gooding and published by Knife Edge Press in 1986 (*Ladder*). Eddie Farrell's documentation of every part of the 'Process Progress Project Archive', on both video and audio format, constituted a work in itself and was shown in the final installation of the show. This self-generative way of working recalled Conceptual practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s yet was free from the systematic. A McLean project forms part of a sequence but is unpredictable: the next step in the process, or exhibition, does not form part of a previously prescribed schema.

The final instalment of the show was a day-long closing event celebrating the 30th anniversary of 'King for a Day'. Despite this historical resonance it did not allow the last realization of the exhibition to be one that was marked by a backward look. By literalizing the activity of exhibition-making, the 'Process Progress Project Archive' became a work of art in its own right.

Belinda Bowring

Bruce McLean