

Tanya Leighton

■ 26 PERFORMANCE

LIVE ART NOW

McLean and *Another Bad Turn Up* —  
Saatchis not amused

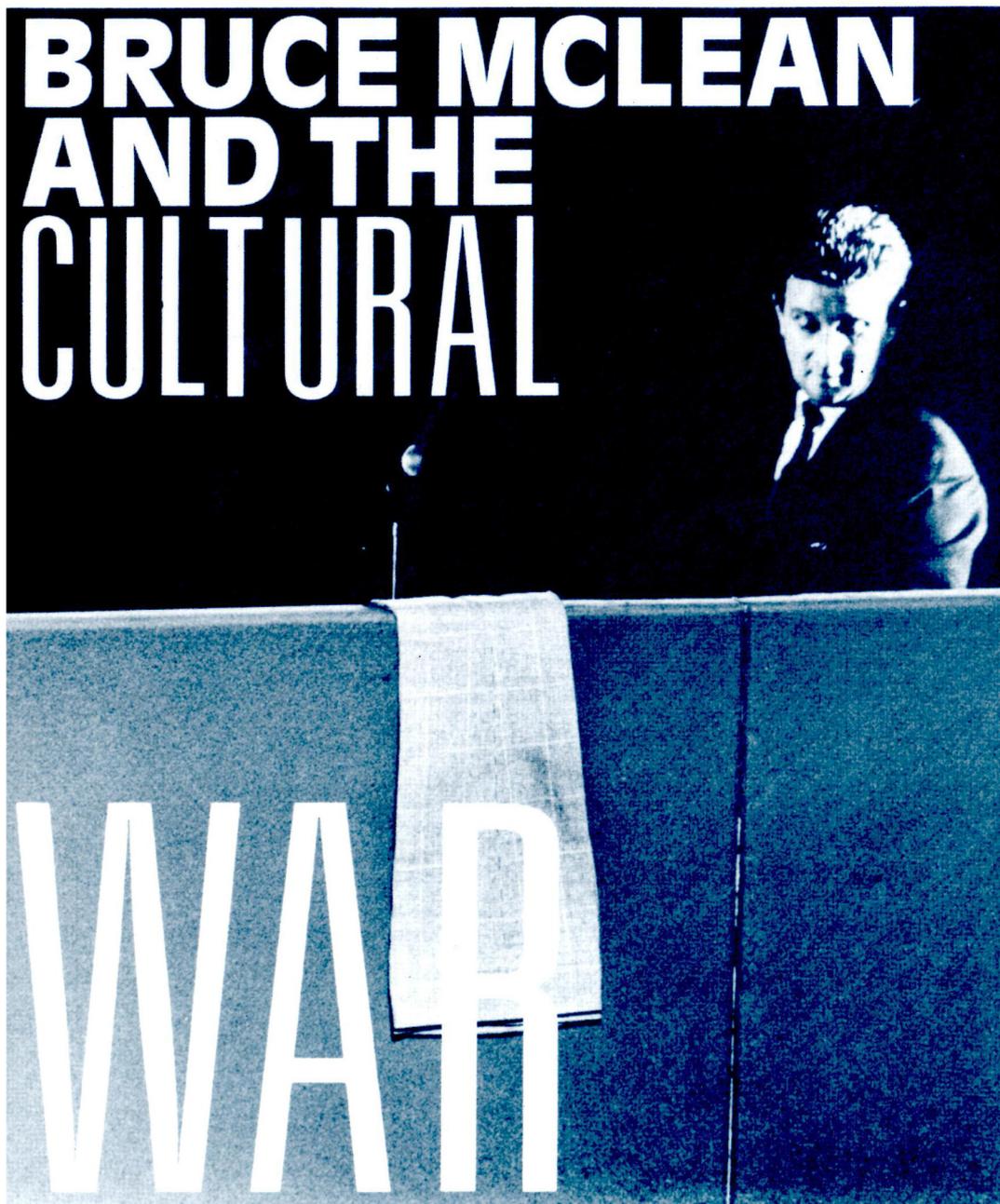


Photo: Chris Harris

Performance, October/November 1985

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**Hot on the heels of Gilbert and George comes a performance artist whose paintings have become an internationally marketable commodity. But unlike them, he has not given up live performance work, and is also very much an active member of the artists community. His views are no less controversial, though, and to back them up he was recently to be seen in full post-modern swagger with bright red boxing gloves among the tourists at the Tate. CHRISSIE ILES jumps into the ring with him:**

**CHRISSIE ILES:** Why have you started making live works again?  
**BRUCE MCLEAN:** Well I never really stopped, but I stopped making big ones.  
**CI:** Why?  
**BM:** Because I kept having problems collaborating with people.  
**CI:** What sort of problems?  
**BM:** Well, just personality problems. I'm quite hard to work with, because I don't know what I'm doing.  
**CI:** But you'd always rather collaborate with other people than do solo work?  
**BM:** I've done a lot of solo pieces, but it's much more interesting to work with other people I think. It shifts the thing into another . . . It becomes something you can't quite control, which I quite like.  
**CI:** So why have you started again now? Have you found a new confidence in being able to work collaboratively with other people?  
**BM:** Well, I don't just go to a studio, as you know, and just work every day; I don't work like that. I work when I feel I need to do something. I felt the need to make a piece of work about something which I felt was in the air. The idea was to make a piece about the cultural war which is being fought, which I started thinking about, then it disappeared slightly, but I'm still interested in it because the way I work is that I start with an idea of one thing and it adds and adds and it goes down a bit then it comes back again; its all the same thing really but more bits get added and bits get forgotten, and I'm trying to make a film about that now. What's happened is that the guy I'm making the film with used to be in the bands Nice Style the pose band 'Nice Style' — Gary . . . when he saw the performance piece at the Tate he said — oh God, this is a clue to how we can make the film; he's thinking perhaps we should use parts of the structure in the film, so it goes.  
**CI:** When you work with other people are you still very much the one in control?  
**BM:** No, I've not always been that way.  
**CI:** So it is truly collaborative in the way ideas get developed?  
**BM:** Well, in this last piece David Ward contributed a lot to that.  
**CI:** But its always seen as your work, isn't it? Bruce Mclean . . . and whoever.  
**BM:** 'Nice Style' was always put out

between Mick Jagger and David Bowie. I don't even like Bowie and I'd gone off Mick Jagger, but the two of them together makes some funny kind of thing occur which is quite interesting. Everyone's got so separate, playing the star, being this and that, I think its much better to work together.  
**CI:** I think the danger of collaboration sometimes is that two people or however many are brought together to work and quite often there is no true interaction; its like different groups who meet at a party and never quite communicate. When it does happen and that cross-over area in the middle really is there, it's really strong, I think.  
**BM:** That's right. You can't invent it.  
**CI:** It's a question of chemistry.  
**BM:** That's right. I get on really well with Paul Richards and we work very well. We've fought like hell too, but we can all work together, because we can make something else occur, sometimes.  
**CI:** Do you think if you work in that way there is a danger of ideas getting dissipated?  
**BM:** Yes. I made a piece at Riverside with Paul Richards called *The Masterwork — the Award Winning Fishknife* which I think was a disaster; because the ideas did get dissipated. We put the piece together as a book, spent a year doing this big book, fantastic thing, a big thick score which we worked on. I think the collaboration was putting the book together . . . he might not agree with me . . . it was fantastic, we worked extremely well, we ended up with five copies of this book. The mistake we made was to try and take that score and make it occur. We should have ended it there and gone our separate ways and done something else. But we tried to do it and that was a mistake. But I would be very interested to try and stage it again. I'd like to do it again the way it really was envisaged; I don't know if you saw it but it didn't turn out anything like what it was supposed to be like, in my opinion anyway. It wasn't a total disaster, I mean we packed the place for a week which is something.  
**CI:** You've done a lot of work abroad, in Europe. Have you considered going to America?  
**BM:** No. I don't really want to go to America very much.  
**CI:** Why not?

**BM:** Yes.  
**CI:** How?  
**BM:** They take it more seriously.  
**CI:** Why do you think they do that?  
**BM:** I don't know . . . they just take everyone's work more seriously. They don't look at an artist and think this person is trying it on. They might be trying it on but they don't ever assume it. They're not stupid, but they assume that if this artist has made a painting then s/he's not pissing around. They may like or not like it but they believe it should be serious and they talk to the artist very seriously.  
**CI:** How do British people receive your work?  
**BM:** They don't take it seriously at all. They think its some sort of rip-off, that you're trying to con people. They do! People think that.  
**CI:** Apart from taking the work more seriously, do you think people abroad have a different approach to performance work?  
**BM:** They're more intrigued. They're interested, they don't want to know what it means, they don't want to understand it, they're just kind of baffled, they have opinions about it and just a very different attitude about it all.  
**CI:** Do you find it easier to do live work abroad because of that?  
**BM:** Yes. I made a lot of performances in Germany which were quite funny and everyone was quite funny about them. It's very hard to work in this country because most people in this country, in institutions particularly don't take it seriously either. They don't know what it is. They have no real feeling for it or understanding of what the hell's going on, so they don't get the best out of the artist either. Everyone starts to get a bit cynical about it all. I'm not at all cynical about it. The performance festivals seem to have died off a bit. There used to be a lot happening in Vienna. There's more mess abroad. Have you ever been to Documenta? The last one was terrible. It was organised by Rudi Fuchs. It was all clean and neat. I like him, but . . . The last one was organised by Swargg . . . whatever his name was, a big guy, my age but fat, big, levis shirt, unshaven, and the place was in complete chaos, it was wonderful, Joseph Beuys with cables and Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman playing a piece in the street and TV — it was just fantastic.

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'It's not just  
omegranates on a  
plate'

Photo: Andreas Horlitz

young, looking at shows and things, so I'm more confident about things.

I would like to see more live things, more people talking to each other, more people doing things together. The Basement Group do a lot of good work.

**CI:** But there's no encouragement for young artists to do that nowadays is there? The art school situation is getting worse and worse, people are being encouraged to be more successful, have a career, be more pragmatic. The climate isn't so conducive to that kind of activity is it?

**BM:** People go to art school to have a career in art. I didn't set out to have a career in art. That's what Julian Schnabel etc do, they're all art careerists, not artists. They're interesting characters and do interesting things, but it's all worked out strategically... if I make a show in Japan then I've conquered that bit, then I'll come round here and do this...

**CI:** Cultural war strategy...

**BM:** Yes. I don't think like that. If someone asks me to do something if I want to do it I'll do it, if I don't, I won't do it. I'll do some really stupid things and some really good things. What I think is so irritating about these students... you'll see a big change in the next few years... the students now are very conservative; and they want to be introduced to whoever. I can do that — but they need to make their own situation. The music thing has made its own situation.

They're keeping all the students out of art schools who would benefit from going there, they're keeping the wild ones out.

**CI:** It's partly the structure; you have to have A levels and be academic.

**BM:** That's right. But most people who have a brain in their heads; most of the people who are artists are bright, but who wants to do A levels? I got expelled because I refused to do them.

**CI:** What is the relationship between your performance work and your other work, painting and sculpture? It's always very linked. Do you create performances in the same way that you create paintings; you feel the need to do it so you do it? That you're just starting to do it again now is interesting because although you have a consistent body of performance work, in 1985 you are more known for your paintings.

**BM:** Well, that's just me being perverse I suppose... no, not really perverse; the painting was a way out. There's a lot of confusion about this. I mean, people say that all the best painting work is directly related to some sort of performance, and it isn't really painting as such, it's just drawings, big notebooks, sketches, which some of them were and are,

but some of them aren't. Some of them are things in their own right, but the actual way they're made, if you watch me make one, is that they're made like a performance. I get a whole lot of canvasses and paint and stuff, I have an idea and I go for it and just work till I stop, then chuck most of it away and save a few. I've always been very interested in... I don't know if you remember the time... I'm a sculptor, that's what I am. I went to St Martins to become a sculptor and to understand what sculpture might be about, and everything I've done since has been an extension of what sculpture can be about. I'm also interested in architecture as I think its part and parcel of sculpture, dealing with space and light and social concerns and political concerns... its not just pomegranates on a plate.

**CI:** In 1972 you said that you were going to give up art. In 1979 you said that you said so because you wanted to work away from the restrictions of the art world, and that you wanted to work in a neutral situation without the stamp of approval from the art world. How do you feel about that in relation to the context in which you're working now? Where you're producing work in the Tate, which is the biggest art establishment in the country, how does that relate to your old ideas?

**BM:** I just keep on contradicting myself. I think that the reason that I or anyone can be whatever they are — an artist or whatever — is that they can do what they like. Not irresponsibly do what you like, but you can do what you like when you like. I mean, we're not bank clerks. I did give it up, but people say in retrospect, 'Oh, that's just a strategy you employed.' I've never employed strategies. People do employ strategies... I've made so many fuck-ups; you may not have heard of them all, but I've made some incredibly disastrous things... I But something always occurs from that disaster, you always learn something from it.

**CI:** But, from wanting to go and work away from the art establishment, and always being very critical of it in your work, you are very much a part of it now. You're accepted, you're an internationally well known and very successful artist. Does that mean that your ideas of six years ago have changed because of that?

**BM:** No, not at all.

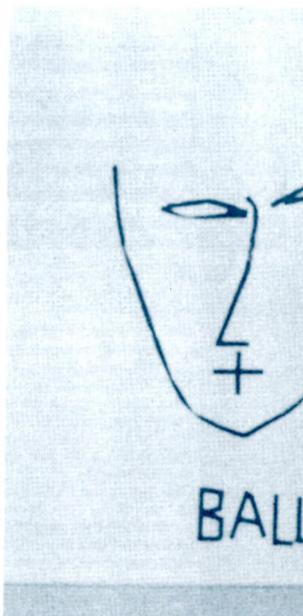
**CI:** So you don't feel any conflict.

**BM:** No, there isn't. I mean, I showed at the Tate in 1972; I made a retrospective there.

**CI:** But are you still seeking that kind of credibility from elsewhere?

**BM:** What credibility?

**CI:** Well, you said in 1972 that you were seeking a credibility from



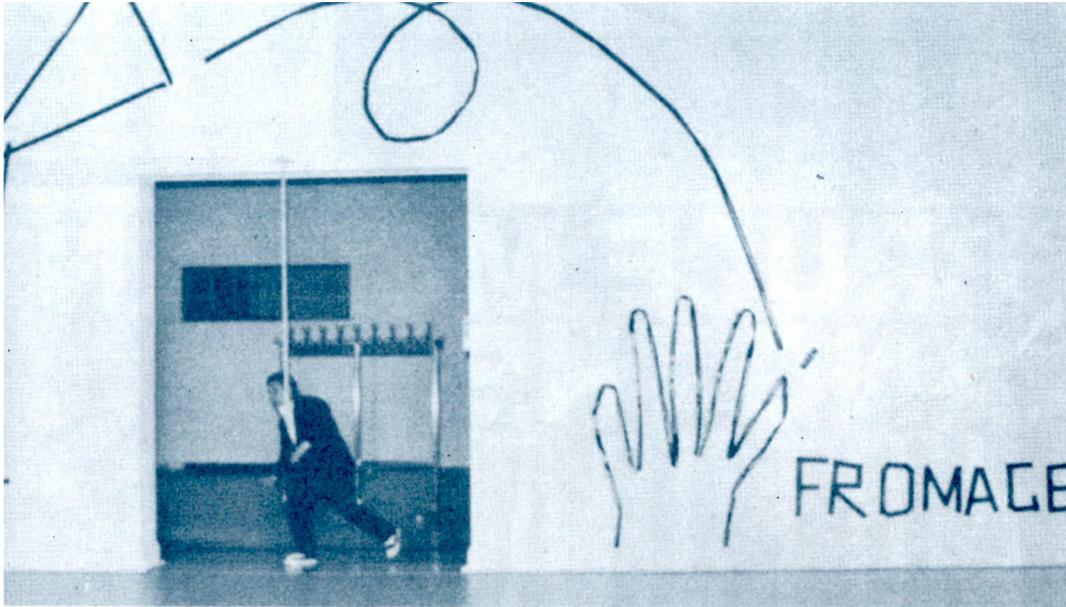
outside the art world, that you wanted your work to be seen by people outside the art world.

**BM:** The thing was, I got so pissed off with these people who called themselves artists and all the people surrounding this thing that quite frankly I don't feel a lot of sympathy for these so-called people who call themselves artists. I don't have many friends who are so-called artists. I just always thought that the activity of being a writer or an artist was an activity where you made something and put it out in front, you externalised it and people looked at it. And what's always pissed me off is not the people who look at it, but the people who get in the way, between the person who's made the bloody thing and the person who's looking at it. There's layers of shit between that. And that's what always annoyed me. It was the galleries and the institutions and all these people got on my tits basically. And they still do, absolutely. But the thing is I'm only interested in making work more available — not just my work, everybody's work — more accessible. The problem with this place (Riverside Studios) is that everybody means that they can't get the local community in. But the local community round here are rather intelligent, and perceptive, and they don't want to come in and eat pretty inferior food and drink rather inferior beer. So there's immediately a barrier; you know, its Moong Bean Bake and Noodle Hawaiian, so there's a snotty attitude about the whole thing which I detest, I still detest it, even more now. I mean, I've just made a show at the Tate, but I could make another show about how that show at the Tate came to be. There's a lot of pressure, not from the very head of the thing, but there's a lot of pressure from that institution for me not to have been there, because they don't really think that somebody who, for one thing, comes from a working class

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background — which actually isn't true — should be seen in that kind of context, 'at the Tate'. No, I'm pretty angry still.

**CI:** A lot of people say that your work is, to quote Mario Amaya in the Art Palace catalogue, a 'hedonistic celebration of life'. Is that true; I mean you do get angry about things.

**BM:** I do get angry, but you can celebrate something . . . I don't like Francis Bacon's paintings very much at all, but he celebrates what it is he's painting about; whether it's a man and a lavatory pan or whatever there's a celebration. I like living; I'm enthusiastic. I made a lot of funny and serious paintings which were colourful and people said they were jokey, which they are quite, I mean I hope they have some humour in them, but also I hope they're about issues which are affecting us all a bit more.

**CI:** Like what?

**BM:** Well, like the cultural war which is going on; there is a cultural war.

**CI:** Between whom?

**BM:** Countries; various countries. I mean, Germany has no army; all they can do is fight a war with culture. And France have wakened up to the fact and are ploughing so much money into Paris again. It's political. Britain of course is so stupid, that they don't do anything. Perhaps that's a good thing. In America, they invented Julian Schnabel — a German name — it's true. He wanted to be a big star, they made him a big star and he made the tour up through from Sicily all the way up through Italy, through Germany and ended up with a show at the Tate. And it was all contrived. I made a piece about that you know, in 1982, called *Another Bad Turn-up*. The one based on this was the one which upset one or two people. It was a big warship with big lights and a big head, and I was walking up and down smoking a pipe like a smoke screen talking about Charlie Saatchi's trouser turn-up. He wasn't amused.

Mrs Saatchi was not amused. It wasn't just about his turn-up, it was about the whole manoeuvring of people. He's set himself up as this and then people all move round him. He and his wife thought it was an attack on him only. Well, it wasn't an attack on him, it was an attack on the whole thing. It's like if he pops up, at a big place with lots of artists, all the artists would pop up, and I don't see why artists should jump just because he comes in, I wouldn't bloody jump just because he comes in — he's a nice guy but you have to retain a certain kind of freedom.

**CI:** How do you think your performance work has changed?

**BM:** I don't think it has changed!

**CI:** You don't think it has? Not at all? Not since 1965? You're still dealing with the same issues and for the same reasons?

**BM:** Not the same issues, no. Well, slightly, I suppose. I think it's got more complicated, in parts.

**CI:** Do you think that the fact that you're older and more successful has had any effect?

**BM:** I've always been successful! I don't feel any different now than I felt 20 years ago, about success. I don't have any money; I still live in the same place. I've always had a little bit of attention; I don't know why; just maybe because of the energy, because I've got no talent. I learnt that very early on.

**CI:** Do you think that performance is relevant as a mode of expression now?

**BM:** Yes I do, but I think that what . . . when I was at St Martins I had a friend called Andy Hall in Birmingham who used to look at the same art magazines as I did. He and I got influenced by Robert Morris, who made a piece called *Sight* with Carolee Schneeman. We saw a photograph; someone had been to America and brought it back, and we thought, oh that looks quite interesting, so we started to do some live pieces then. I'd actually made a

piece in Glasgow before I came to London but the thing that we were doing was trying to extend what we thought sculpture could be, it wasn't like sculpture was an object which went there and you wandered around it and looked at it. We thought we could be the sculpture, that was all, and Gilbert and George of course became living sculptures, they started all about the same time.

**CI:** And now, in 1985, now that all that's passed and people have gone through the performance of the 70's and all that . . .

**BM:** Well, we never called it performance. This was an Arts Council term, when they suddenly realised that there were a lot of people doing it and people were applying for grants, they then called it performance art grant or something. It was called actions or events — well, you know this yourself. I mean I never actually called anything I've done a performance. I've called it a dance, or a procedure, or a statement, or an action, or an act, or a poem, or something, anything to avoid it being called that, quite deliberately.

**CI:** But now with the so-called return to painting and the new spirit movement of the early eighties, and the general move away from the seventies kind of work, do you think that performance is still relevant?

**BM:** Yes I do, but in a different sort of way. The thing I'm interested in is I like the cinema (I don't go very often) and I like certain kinds of theatre, non-theatrical theatre, not the papier mache-Turn-Again-Dick kind of theatre, but theatre made by artists. I like the look of Robert Wilson's stuff that I've seen. Because he's coming from an architectural background. And it seems to be very theatrical in a non-theatrical way than anything I've seen in the theatre. But I do actually think it's incredibly important to have a live form.

**CI:** But it's not really taken seriously ▶

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