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# Humour as the weapon to demolish the Establishment

HUMOUR IS ONE of the most potent weapons an artist can use in his fight to formulate a new standpoint in the teeth of established opposition. But it is also strangely neglected. For, although laughter may be a ruthlessly effective medium with which to demolish an accepted consensus of opinion, it has always been regarded as the preserve of callow youth.

Rembrandt, for instance, who began life as a robust enemy of the classical tradition, never followed up the subversive tone of his early Rape of Ganymede, where propriety is flouted by showing the screaming baby urinating as an eagle snatches him into the sky.

And even Manet, the creator of perhaps the most wittily scandalous image of all in *Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe*, later sobered up and became positively bourgeois in his choice of subject-matter.

Only Duchamp continued to cherish the power of satire throughout his life, producing at the age of 77 a reproduction of the Mona Lisa without the famous moustache he had earlier drawn on her face, and inscribing it with one cheeky word: *rasée!*

But even though Duchamp's influence permeates the best contemporary art more and more thoroughly, his wicked sense of humour has not inspired many successors. Art, it is still felt, should always reflect the seriousness of its practitioners' underlying intentions, and any attempt to inject it with wit must surely lead to damaging accusations of fri-

ner up the side of the plinths, McLeane also highlights the tedious lengths to which Moore goes as he tries to ring the changes on a single repetitive motif.

A rich variety of meanings, therefore, inform this ostensibly simple and ingenuous piece, ensuring that McLeane cannot be dismissed as a joker who never grew up. His restless temperament must help here, preventing him from remaining satisfied with a superficial gesture that works on one level alone.

Symptomatic of this impatience is his approach to the present exhibition, which has been handled with total flexibility in order to let him experiment with a whole range of different ideas.

## FEROCIOUS

Last week, he kicked off with plinths again, but this time there was a roomful of them and McLeane himself did not participate. Instead, a page torn out of a glossy magazine was placed on each stand, thereby providing a concrete

A Sequence from Bruce McLeane's Reclining Figure Semi-draped Pose Piece for Three Plinths Work, now at

Situation, Horseshoe Yard, W.I.

## ART NEWS by Richard Cork

illustration of the exhibition's title: *Objects No Concepts*.

It was a characteristically surreptitious reversal of the prevalent desire to oust art objects from the gallery environment; but McLeane again aimed at commenting on another level, too. The pages all consisted of adverts for consumer products—domestic appliances in the main—and their come-hither captions were reprinted with ferocious glee as a list of exhibits pinned on the wall.

So McLeane was having it both ways, smiling at conceptual dogma even as he satirised the presentation of art as a commercial investment. But all that disappeared with the advent of a new week, and for the last few days he has been working in

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the gallery enacting a piece entitled *There's a Sculpture on My Shoulder*.

Divided into two areas of activity, the exhibition now takes its cue from a rough series of lines drawn on the gallery wall tracing the contour of McLean's shoulder as he crouches on the floor.

This in itself refers ironically to the obsessions of artists like Rückriem who involve their own physical capabilities in the making of a work. But the idea does not stop there. The names of all McLean's sculptural hates, including most of the St. Martin's group, are inscribed over the lines to imply that their heritage has become an intolerably weighty burden, threatening to squash all the vitality out of him.

Both points are deftly driven home, and so is the other piece in the exhibition, which contains McLean himself sitting at a desk producing hundreds of worthless drawings, screwing them up and hurling them to the floor—only to be retrieved by a gallery director who carefully irons them out, one by one, and hangs them on the wall.

The implied attitude towards the voracious supply-and-demand system is trenchantly dramatised and well worth expressing. But I felt dissatisfied with the activity, mainly because it seemed to exhaust my interest after one scrutiny.

And yet this failing is evaded in the video tapes and the Walter de Maria film, which hits out with magnificent verve and independence against the pettiness of contemporary artists as they stake out small slices of experimental territory for themselves and cling to them possessively. The combination of McLean's own filmed performance and his raspingly militant soundtrack creates a far richer experience, and prompts me to hope that he will use this particular medium again.

For McLean is obviously talented enough to extend himself beyond these rather inbred comments on the present art context; and if the sentiments expressed in the last of his 1000 sentences called *King For A Day* is anything to go by, he wants to do just that. "Goodbye sculpture, art pieces/things/works/stuff everything, Hallo life, piece," it runs,

volly. It is precisely the kind of criticism which Bruce McLean lays himself open to, and yet he rides it willingly and with puckish delight. For he realises that his ability to amuse is a very rare asset; and since his energies are all directed towards questioning the priorities of other contemporary artists, it becomes a tool that suits his purposes.

## HEATED

A lot of his irreverence is aimed at the Caro school of sculpture, which is the inevitable outcome of his early training at St. Martin's. It will be fascinating, one day, to trace the different ways he and his fellow students there—Richard Long, Gilbert and George—reacted against the doctrines which then prevailed in the school's sculpture department.

Even now, several years later McLean still becomes heated and vituperative when he remembers his experience there imprisoned in what he felt to be a narrow dialogue which succeeded merely in replacing one set of sculptural conventions with another, equally rigid book of rules.

Like his friends, he began to look for some activity outside the limited one prescribed by his teachers: something that did not automatically depend on the making of painted constructions. In one sense, his decision to escape from this tyranny carries on from where the Caro group left off when they defied the boundaries set up by the museum plinth.

But in another, his leaning towards iconoclasm left the purely formal preoccupations of that group far behind. One of the video tapes now to be seen in his current exhibition at Situation repeats an early piece evolved soon after the St. Martin's period—a series of mocking poses which he assumes to poke fun at Moore's reclining figures.

## UNEVEN

Straddled uncomfortably across three uneven plinths, McLean here exploits his natural talent for clowning to guy the lumbering weight of a Moore bronze. But it is not just a facile exercise in mud-throwing. By flexing his biceps like a bragging boxer he manages at the same time to point out a vein of boorish pomposity in Moore which in fact contributes a pertinent criticism of the older man's work.

And by pushing the reclining attitudes into outright absurdity, so that his body finally ends up crawling in the most abject man-