



Response to 'Parameters of Practice - Annabel Nicolson's 1970s Practice' by Patti Gaal-Holmes

With Cate Elwes, Annabel Nicolson and Patti Gaal-Holmes

CE: I remember someone telling me about their experience of performing many years ago. He felt that the performance was the only time he felt in control of a situation. His life outside the performed moment was where he felt most helpless and most at the mercy of chance elements. I'm very interested to know how Annabel sees that balance between control and chance – because actually your work is highly controlled, carefully thought out and beautifully staged, such as in the *Sweeping of the Sea* piece – what exactly is the relationship between control and chance? My feeling is that it's more geared toward control rather than chance?

PGH: Annabel is here today, which is wonderful. Would you like me to answer that?

AN: Yes please.

PGH: It's interesting that Annabel sets up situations that are very considered. It's not a question of any random elements simply happening in the space. However, the consideration given to the setting up does allow other unexpected elements to occur. If members of the audience are invited to speak or become involved in the performance or cast shadows it really changes the work. I think that balance between control and un-control is crucial. I'm really interested in Robert Musil's book of essays on precision and soul. He discusses the tension between precision in the work verses letting things go in order to let the work become itself.

CE: I also think that people's behaviour is already controlled. That there is a natural shyness; a reluctance to be pulled into the light. There was one artist who used to make performances that were designed to humiliate the audience – and you always sat at the back to avoid being dragged into it. We all behave within a fairly tight range of possible actions. I think quite a lot of it is actually determined.

But how do you set up a situation in which people will behave or experience in a different way? Partly this seems to be about how we interpret the actions after the event. Looking at that wonderful image of *Sweeping the Sea* I can see how that changes my thinking about women's labour or women's relationship to the land. I'm a little resistant to this idea that everything was just free and hippy-like...

PGH: I don't think it was. When you saw something like *Matches* – I mean, I wasn't there and I didn't see it – this striking of matches that creates a fleeting light, a stuttering process – you can imagine that there would be moments when it simply wouldn't work. Or loops of film breaking – I guess the technology was always subject to the situation. I don't mean that it was just unformed, that anything could happen...

AN: I'd like to say something about the balance between control and chance. Do you remember a piece called *Precarious Vision* where somebody had to read with their back to the screen and they had an identical text being projected on the screen and they were supposed to keep in synch. But they couldn't see how fast the words on the screen were going. I was at the back projecting and if they read too fast I would put my hand over the lens cutting out their light. So they were forced to stop reading. The words on the screen would catch up because the projector was still running. And if they read too slowly I would use the freeze frame so that the words were frozen on the screen allowing the speaker to catch up. So the situation was...
I think what Patti brought up was the importance of consideration that there was an awareness of what would happen but it wasn't all predetermined. Within the performance space, the projection space, there was an openness. So whoever was doing the performance, brings something else to it.

You said something about shyness and the self-consciousness of stepping forward. But what I always liked about those performances was that the audience seemed to identify with whoever was performing and they felt very sympathetic to them and kind of gave them their support for what they were doing because they realised it was quite difficult for that person to stand in the limelight and do it. So there was quite a bond between the audience and the speaker.

[The following was written by Annabel Nicolson in response to the original transcript but is meant to read as a continuation of the discussion. It draws on other reference material]

As I was trying to answer the question I was aware that most people in the room had not seen any of my performances. I am quite out of practice in talking about my work and ran into difficulties trying to describe it.

The question has stayed with me and I think the answer lies somewhere in my understanding of what performance is. It is the moment when things happen. It is the same with film in the sense that projecting is the moment when it all becomes real.

"To create space. Projecting light and seeing its space.
Space of the moment, space of the lightbeam
Space of the audience.
Space that had no other existence".¹

Until the moment of performing the ideas had no physical form and I could only hope that I could bring them to life and do justice to them. The various aspects I thought about and which mattered to me were very much to do with the nature of the space, the way the light fell and how people would come in or get from one place to another. Ideas would come from the space itself and would become part of the work.

By definition live film events usually happened with the projectors in the same space as the audience. The practicalities of coping with the equipment and trying to move around in the midst of the audience meant that the atmosphere was quite informal. The work depended on people helping each other, especially if there was more than one projector involved. A natural

¹ 'Notes for Live in Your Head' Whitechapel Gallery April 2000

development form this, for me, was to include other people in the performances and ask them to do things.

Sometimes what a person was asked to do was quite difficult as in 'Precarious Vision' [1973]. I had to explain to the audience first what was needed and then ask who would like to try it. There was always a lot of support from the audience for whoever stepped forward. The performers usually enjoyed trying to do what they had to do. The risk was not so much for them as it was for me as I was dependent on those who took part and their understanding of what was involved. There was a lot of trust both ways. The pieces usually did work because everyone wanted them to. In a sense there was a collective will to make it work.

In 'Precarious Vision' and related film performances from that time the structure not only allows for, but depends on, what other people bring to the situation. The responses of the performer and the rest of the audience make the work what it is.

It is difficult to say where the balance lies between the prescribed and the inadvertent. Both are important and they both work in relation to each other.

"MATCHES' 1975, two screen for two readers. Variable duration.

Performance for two readers each dependent on their own unpredictable source of light.

The performance takes place in complete darkness. Two volunteers from the audience are given copies of the same text on candlepower and the fading of light. Positioned some distance apart, each with a box of matches, they are asked to read alternately. Each reads from the point that had reached in their previous turn for as long as their flame lasts.

Two parallel readings of the same text unaffected by each other. Each dependent on their own unpredictable source of light. Progress is slow, in and out of sync, with false starts and sudden silences. Sounds become very important. Shadows take on a life of their own."²

In this piece the impromptu becomes very significant, the striking of matches, the attempts to read. The performers struggle on, try not to be affected by each other. They are part of the situation, but what happened is not determined by them.

"DOORWAY 1974 variable duration

The door was next to the screen so that as people came in you would see a shaft of light from the stairs fall across the room and a dark figure coming in. I did a piece with someone standing reading in the cinema and only having enough light to read when people arrived. It took a while for people to realise what was happening. You could hear footsteps on the stairs and the people who were already there would be sitting in the darkness waiting for the next person to arrive so they could hear more of the text. Sometimes the person would open the door, see just a dark room with no film and shut the door again. Then someone else would arrive and you'd hear a few more words of

² 'Matches' description from Luxonline.org.uk 2003

the text. The shafts of light and the few words that were used were like details just caught and then it would be dark again. Sometimes you'd hear footsteps approaching, getting louder, all the expectation, but they'd carry on past the cinema to the caretaker's flat and no one would come in and it would still be dark."³

In a situation where the incidental becomes part of the structure everything has the possibility of being meaningful.

[This next paragraph is from the original transcript of the discussion in May 2009]

I worked a lot with improvising musicians. And their philosophy was very much about awareness of all the things that were going on. Not only what the artist or musician had conceived but all the other random elements that become important. And recognising those not excluding them. It comes through in the interview with Max Eastley (a fantastic improvising musician) where I talk about a false view of the world: that when the lights are turned off that the world is shut out during the performance or the film. What I was trying to do was create a space where all those other random elements could become important.

[The remaining text is a continuation of Annabel's written response]

Random may not be quite the right word, but it's about being able to work with things that might seem insignificant and giving them value.

"Max Eastley: 'When you see an artwork under a spotlight you have to forget everything around the edges because of the strength of the spotlight – there's a frame, a line and past that doesn't concern the work. The images you were working with didn't do that.'

Annabel Nicolson: 'I think the qualities of light relate to this somehow, not spotlighting things but using light which in itself is precarious, like fire and matches and incidental light like the searchlight on the crane on the building site opposite – so that the illumination itself is in question and might be on a knife edge. This idea that things are illuminated by attention, by being looked at. 'Performance with dark edges' [1977] was very much concerned with that and with what happens to things when they are not being looked at. It's to do with relations between phenomena rather than a fixed view of things, recognising that nothing has a fixed meaning, orientating oneself in that shifting sense of reality.'⁴



³ 'Doorway' quote from 'The Early Years of the CO-op' composed from recordings of filmmakers by Annabel Nicolson 1979.

⁴ Annabel Nicolson talking to Max Eastley, *Music* no.18 (July 1978)