

out of the rectangle above. At times Beckley can be exasperating. In *Car, Window: Fly*, the two photographs of the windows which at first sight seem to be perfectly symmetrical (superimposable), are actually not so because one is open and one is closed. In fact, on the white rectangle near the open window, there is a fly. Very logical! Has the window been left open to let the fly out, or will the fly come in through the open window? Leaving that rectangle white too? These are disquieting questions precisely because they want no answer. In this case too the fly, which represents « chance », or in any case the unexpected, while the car is the context, is what determines the structure of the work. Likewise, in the piece with the broom and the dirt, *Broom*, it is the dust which together determines the apparent symmetry of the work, causing the broom to move from one side to the other, and, at the same time, with its presence denies it.

In some pieces content is organized almost exclusively through colour. In the one with the faucets, a detail of which is reproduced on the cover, the background of the left photo is red (hot water), that of the right hand photo is blue (cold water), and that of the picture with water in the middle is yellow. Warm water? But red and blue make violet, not yellow, don't they??? These pieces are in general the ones with the most direct impact, and also the most elegant, with such dazzling colours (CIBA processing), that at times they shine with their own light. One such work, not shown here, is again in three pieces, with a red, blue and yellow ground, having a rose stem, a violet stem and a stream of falling sugar respectively, with a reference to the popular rhyme « roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet and so are you ». Where the sweetness is incongruously yellow and the « you » on the other hand turns green (blue+yellow) because it is almost a pun.

Although Beckley seems lately to have moved more towards almost exclusively visual pieces, he has not stopped writing stories. Writing almost seems to help him to sort out his ideas — and we have seen how at the beginning everything in fact got started this way.

Beckley's stories have always had a mysterious, unlikely and evasive side to them, but just recently they seem to have advanced further in this direction. His latest manner is, if possible, still more ambiguous; by which I mean that all relationships are systematically kept loose, that they have less cohesion, almost as though they had turned from liquid to gas. The stories have a feeling of wholeness about them, but within the whole the bits and pieces are arranged and broken up again in endless overlapping formations, like crazy soap bubbles or the fragments of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope. The latest stories are puzzles that cannot be solved, for they are already stated as such within their structure. This is not to say that they constitute a closed reality. Rather, by making themselves out to be one of the infinite possibilities, they continually refer to alternative realities. As I was saying earlier, this is an exasperating

aspect of Beckley's work, which keeps on slipping away, refuses to be referred to any logic of before or after, and confines itself to supposing a series of possibilities one of which, perhaps, may ultimately come into effect. What's more, he even says that it doesn't matter which.

Indeed the end is of such small importance that it is always suggested right the start, as a possibility. The story does not really end a tall, for the simple reason that it has not yet begun. Beckley's stories are all hypotheses. The initial hint that the ending may be a melancholy or a sad or a surprise one is, in effect, a joke played on structure itself; a trick that refers to story's descriptive content, a parable of theory, and not to the real story, which does not exist. The facts succeed one another in a series of incongruous sequences that make some sort of sense only because this incongruity is just what the artist wishes to communicate. Reality is desperately evasive and discontinuous; it slips through your fingers just when you think you've seized it. That is why his work as a whole is a study of nostalgias, one after the other, till the last: « that he should understand » (3).

« I think it's possible for an artist to do the same thing a gynaecologist does everyday, after looking at many vaginas... an evening of candlelight — is it naive to assume that he can become involved with whatever lies beneath a skirt? ». With what lies under the appearances or transparencies of structure?

After Stella and the minimalists, Beckley's work takes on a new depth; the structure which each different piece assumes refers neither to a circumscribed and balanced universe (like the « relational » European abstract art that Stella was alluding to) nor to a conceptual decision made beforehand and subsequently visualized, as in the case of Stella and all minimal art. Though varying from work to work, it always has the constant of asymmetry and incongruity. All Beckley's work resembles an array of precasts, and so in a way, the structure systematizes the a-causal. The apparent symmetry acquires a sense derived from asymmetry and not vice versa. At times, form appears symmetric but is not, because of content, or content seems to suggest a symmetry which is however denied by form. The whole of the new structure is based on this play of relationships and overlappings of form and content, between the form of the photographic paper and the descriptive context. The tension raised by this ambiguity is the balance or the non-balance, of the work almost a challenge to any rigid or definitive classification or statement. In the world of the fixed stars the discontinuous lies in ambush at all sides, not as a rule (it would be the same than stating something definite), but as an ever changing term, a dispositional absolute field that cannot be named.

Barbara Radice

Notes:

(1) « Questions to Stella and Judd » by Bruce Glazer. *Minimal Art, a critical anthology*, Dutton and Co., N.Y. 1968.

(2) *Ibidem*.

(3) Wallace Stevens, *Esthétique du Mal, The Palm at the End of the Mind*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1972.

Charlemagne Palestine

interview by Tommaso Trini

My tone chemistry years

Yes, I did receive training from a music school, but I didn't enjoy it. I found that I needed much time to think on my own, to re-evaluate, so I was expelled and from then on, I spent most of my time around visual artists. I found that I had to stop even my hands, what you were taught to do with the hands became a detrement. And it was hard for me to learn how not to play in a classical fashion. Now, with my piano pieces, I hardly move my hands horizontally, but the changes that are going on vertically are more complex than in any classical piano work, though horizontally I sometimes never move from a certain small area. That's something you're never taught to do. In classical music you're constantly thinking in a linear, horizontal fashion.

I find that in past music, they dealt with linearity and context and different exploitations of elements, but never went within the sound. I take one element as far as it can go. I've been doing pieces for ten years, that just used the same element, and put it in a million different contexts, a million different energies, constantly exploiting what is inside it.

I was already involved in « multimedia » in the middle sixties. I was interested in electronic music, lights, films, etc. but I found that what they were doing then, was more like a hodge-podge, ... like a patch-work collage, than a well conceived work. I take each element and make it very unified to my conception, whether it be books, sounds, my body, my videotapes, my performances, my perceptions... If I do experiments, it's private. Rather than a musician I consider myself a sound-artist, because I use sound in all kind of manifestations, whether in terms of time, energy, or visual raw material. I don't want to be classified in a way that if tomorrow I come up with a work for a volcano... I can't do it because that's not music. Whatever it is, I'm still going to do it. People find themselves more times fighting the context than doing the work. But I try to make my context very vague so that no matter what I come up with, it's in the context of what I do. That's the important thing... Maybe, after we're all dead, next century, they'll decide what we did and classify it. I leave it for them. It will be their business...

The way it started, is that I saw that the works of the European school, and John Cage, were dealing too much with context and cultural-social elements. Instead I felt almost like a chemist... Nobody seemed to know what a sound would do if it were left alone. So I began to re-evaluate what certain elements would do if you mixed them together... Well, does it create a solid, a liquid, a transparent thing, a translucent thing? So that's how I first began. I thought: I'm not going to make any music, because there are two thousand years of music, and that's enough. I'll just take the sounds, put them together and see what they want to do them-

selves. After doing that for two or three years, all of a sudden, I began to hear these amazing things going on in the ozone of a sound, and I'd sit and listen for many hours while it kept changing, wherever I was in a space, I didn't know why. So I just kept doing it, and trying to learn what that was. I call all those from about 1964 to 1969 my tone chemistry years.

Then I began to feel that more of a dialogue was needed between the pure elements I was working with, so I began to make modular pieces, like for example Le Corbusier in architecture. I transformed the sound to make it like a hand to a glove, a glove to the environment. Then I became personally more involved and I began to imitate with my own body things I heard in the tone chemistry. And I started to do body pieces extending my work in sound where I would sing tones while walking, skipping, running, falling, hitting against objects, etc. Using the sounds to articulate the different dramas of my body.

What about the audience?

To me the audience is almost like another part of the piece, because each work is like a module, it's a set of elements, a set of rituals. But how I will evolve these rituals, is completely affected and transformed by the audience. Before I do a concert... I sit at the table and I can't figure out what I am going to do... even though I've been thinking about the work for weeks. It's because as soon as I am in front of the people work becomes the translation of the energy in the space... I put myself in suspended animation and the energy of the people in the space helps determine which way the piece will go like in *Ouiga*... My eyes are closed and I feel the energy of people passing through me. Before a performance, I often feel like a balloon without air in it. And when I go into the space I am gradually inflated by the amount of energy the audience emits. So that's why it always has that momentary sense of drama, of immediate communication. Later, when I look back at the tapes or to any documentation of the work I can't believe that's what I did because I don't even remember having done it. It's almost like when you go to a seance, where everybody sits around a table and they all hold hands and you create a power around and inside.

I almost think of the audience as the seance, the people around in a circle, and I in the middle as the spirit or the ghost. A few years ago I did a piece ghost. A few years ago I did a piece was about aggressively running in a crowded space, but what happened was this. The audience started pushing me as a pinball machine, they just kind of threw me and laughed and I became almost like a clown or a fallen hero, where all might get together, tie him up, kick him up, and throw things at him for not being what they expected him to be. In fact people hated that piece, because they had decided that I was a hero. And when they saw me almost laughable and people making fun of me and pushing me against the wall and I'd trip and fall, they felt upset... I remember certain movies like Samson. When he was a hero, people loved him

but then, when he loses his hair out of deceived love, the same people who loved him throw things at him and call him names, because they had wished him to be something and when disappointed could only react with anger and frustration.

They way I think of it sometimes is like when my cats are in this room. If the energy is very relaxed, they are usually asleep, but if some people come in and there's a lot of energy, they would start running back and forth, almost as if they had picked up the energy and lived it out, and yet still be the essence of themselves; they are not thinking about art, they are not thinking about anything, they're just responding. Well, sometimes I think of myself almost like a cat. You put me in any space and I'll react... I'll just become... I react true to myself, because I have certain rituals I do over and over again. In my work I'm kind of a zoo keeper and animal also. The animal always acts in a certain way, if you don't feed him he'll growl, if you pet him he'll purr.

Singing

What happens is that as the years go by, my fantasies change and my body works differently. There are things I can do now, which in ten years I won't... I can run now and do certain activities that I may not be able to do later and that kind of gradual decay interests me too. Often we try so much to be intelligent and have so much scope, that we are looking for all sort of different things but sometimes the essence is right in front of your face, and you're looking all the way across the horizon. Often a physical or mental problem or handicap, will make you have to look right in front of you, and you realize the answer is in front of you at the very beginning. But I feel my work will be that way too, about time, about things... That's why I feel the work will have a longevity, in that it won't be boring, and in time in fact, it will just keep having to manifest itself in different ways.

No, I hope never to be a virtuoso, because a virtuoso is in a sense an artificial tool. It may turn out that sometime in my life, I'll be able to play things, or to do things of incredible quickness, quicker than anybody else... but it will happen by chance. And then maybe, I'll loose that and go on to something else. It will never be just to do it fast, it will be an energy that I feel and that it has to be done fast, and it turns out that I do it faster than anyone. When I first started singing certain ways, for a while, I was singing better in that particular kind of things, taking overtones, than anyone else around was doing. But then I got bored with that and I went on to something else, and now there are people, I've seen at concerts, who are doing better than what I did. I was able to do what they can do now six years ago, and now I can't do it. So it's about allowing myself to have something and loose it, and maybe regain it again, or never find it, and go on and not be so conscious of having it at all.

Well, I've found that I have tried to keep away always from disciplines that will smooth out what's really me. That is very much against what is in... what

generation we are in now. Wherever I go, someone is studying something else from Tibet or Japan or China or India or some other place. They are trying to exude the body structure of some other ideal, than their own. I do exactly the opposite, I do none of those. I try to never put myself into a position of doing something that I wouldn't... that my body wouldn't... I do the opposite. The discipline is that I try to never be different than myself. And I've tried over the years to look at my own body, as though it were the ideal... and how do you make this thing work best as itself.

... Instead of trying to become more intelligent... instead of trying to be a scholar, I'm just trying almost to be... more primitive, but essential, and not less sensitive... more sensitive and less intelligent. To know less but to feel and respond more... and to learn more from life-response than from books... I don't even read any more except for a magazine. I don't want to saturate my responses with hearsay, I want to experience everything first-hand, that's my ideal.

Blood on the piano...

I watched the things that I did and felt more comfortable with, and I did them over and over again, and that was my ritual. Two pieces come to mind from 1962. In *Tantrum* I sit down at the piano very angrily and start banging with my hands as hard as I can on the keys with my eyes closed. I keep going until I get all my rages out of my system. Then I open my eyes, and my hands are covered with blood, and the piano keys are covered with blood, and at that time I stopped, it frightened me, and I remember I left the blood on the piano for many weeks.

Another ritual that I remember had to do with environment in time... it had to do with a small apartment, with an upright piano, and a woman I was living with. It was a very intense relationship, especially physically, and we spent most of the day making love... I remember it was a very small place so there was basically only room for a piano and bed. And maybe a stove. So for about six months we hardly ever went out and we spent most of the day making love in the dark. I remember that each time we would finish an encounter... I would slowly... almost like in a dream, walk in the dark, towards the piano. I would sit down and try... whatever the energy was in the room; start with just one finger, so as to almost make no sound at all, and try to fill the room with the aroma, the oral aroma we'd experienced. I remember we did that almost continually, for six months. And she drew, in the dark as well. We didn't do this for any art context, only for ourselves. Then I went on to other things.

Like a termite

In 1964 I began to play the bells in a church in NYC. Every day I would play in this big tower, with this huge instrument above me, where the biggest bell was as tall as I was, and the sound could be heard for many, many blocks. In order to play it, I had to smash on oak levers with my fists. They were very hard to play, and with pedals like an

organ... I never had an instrument like that. It was like my whole body had to be like fists. I had to do this for half an hour. And it was the most intense physical experience of playing an instrument. I began to play the same piece everyday, just as if I were relating to people at a concert, but on a massive scale. I'd see these thousands of people in the streets and they were kind of egging me on. To play for thirty minutes, is an intense experience, you have to think about the people you're angry at, and things you're unhappy with, and things you desire, anything to keep your energy going on so you don't stop, because physically it is devastating to continue.

I was always conscious of being an artist, but I didn't see that as my work, I didn't invite the artworld to come hear it. Thousands of people heard it everyday, and didn't know what was going on up there. In fact, I almost lost that job three times, but luckily the media came and did articles about these bells.

Since I was given so much public support, there was no way they could fire me, it had made their church famous, so whether they hated it or not they couldn't get rid of it. I was like a termite, they couldn't get rid of me no matter how they tried, I was called an endangered species, it's like an animal when there are so few of them left, you're not allowed to shoot them. So they were forced to consider me an endangered species, when in reality they thought of me as a termite. So I was able to keep this piece going on for six years...

On the worn tapes

And then I remember a piece... that had to do with taking sounds of places, and putting them together... and I'd have a big sound of a crowd, and just let it go on, and then I'd just have these overlays of different places, energies that were going on simultaneously like huge collages, because I didn't have any real equipment... it was like « musique concrète », except I didn't change them, I let them be exactly as they were... In 1967, I had no money at all. I had a job and I lost it, so I had to use a tape over again, and I came up with a whole set of pieces that were about terrain, like the desert. Since I didn't have any money, I had to go to Canal Street and buy the cheapest tapes, that had been used many times... so that they wouldn't have no longer smooth, consistent coatings. Well, these were more like the Rocky Mountains... I would take a static sound and record it on the worn tape, so that it became uneven terrain... At first I thought it sounded defective, then I got really excited about it and tried to buy the worst tapes possible, ones that had been rained on, or in the sun too long. Gradually, as I started to get money again, these pieces started to get much smoother, because then, I could buy better tapes, and taperecorders.

So around 1969, my music became much more refined and went in the opposite direction. I did a piece in California where the public ran out saying it sounded like a refrigerator hum. I was dealing with how you can take one

sound and by changing its scale, change its relationship to a space. These electronic pieces were like thin lines, that could be erased by a cough or any noise at all. The piece was continuous and in a completely quiet room, you could have heard it as a thin line... All that was about the terrain of the audience, and how the audience affects the piece. I think of my electronic pieces as objects because they exist almost as sculptures, in fluid transformation.

Frescoes

Now I'm interested in making huge frescoes, using all the elements I've used before. They'll be very much like my piano pieces, more complex, constantly changing and grand in scale. I sometimes use them in other contexts too. I have these lariats... sounds whirling through space. I take an almost static sound from my synthesizer, then I take a speaker and extend it from a long speaker wire, so that the sound is coming out like a continuous thick liquid, then I place myself in the middle of the room, standing on a table, set the speaker into motion, make everybody sit and spin it at incredible speed around the space. It becomes like a recurring circle drawn in sound, in a square room. Even though it's one sound, it just keeps shimmering and transforming by the physical nature of sound in motion. It's called a lariat, like a cowboy's rope.

Jago inciting the dancers

The most controversial piece I have done in a long time was with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in NYC in the Spring of 1975.

Merce has a series at his studio, where he invites people to collaborate with him on evenings simultaneously without prior communication between the two conceptions. In this particular evening, I decided to put the whole form of chance simultaneity on the line, by constructing a piece that took pot-shots at the form and my collaborators, while the piece was in progress. For me, back in the early to middle sixties, Merce and John's work was the most fertile sociological phenomenon going on in performance, among other reasons because the audience was always so hostile and spontaneous or at least unpredictable during their performances.

Now, ten years later, Merce is a living myth and all the performances are attended by loving admirers — good for the ego but lacking the original climate of controversy. So my idea of returning the Cunningham form to its original status of dramatic sociological phenomenon by turning the tables on the form. Instead of the dancers and musicians constructing a work inciting the audience, the musicians construct a form inciting the dancers, with the audience perhaps as voyeurs.

The piece consisted of a taped monologue which I did in my bathroom with the water faucet running the entire time. In the monologue I explain how difficult it is for me to deal with the space of the Cunningham studio, because of the way the ambience is set up, and go on to explain that I found it much more comfortable to perform in my own bathroom. Then I explain

the difference between the personal artist versus the puppetier artist, and go on from there criticizing and subtly sabotaging my opponents form. At the same time, live, during the performance I also did movements which, in my Bowery hum groping style, heightened the drama between Merce's elegant dance style. In short two conceptions pitted against each other with one playing the Jago type character as minor saboteur. Even the angry dancers afterwards admitted the piece forced them to dance better than ever — the magic of adrenalina, the law of survival in the jungle! The result showed that even under fire the Cunningham form still was powerful and full of possibilities.

But you're too late...

Well now, I have a whole set of new visual things... these are rooms, where I do a body piece setting up the room with some kind of charcoal or thing I can put all around. What they would do is to mark up the walls and floors with the charcoal and then, I would come in with my body and do a piece in that space and also make a sound and record it audio. I would then add a fixative to these impressions in the charcoal and then have the sound recreated. So, it's sort of like again the invisible... it's like the debris of when I was there. You come into the space, and you see where I went and what I hit against, and the impressions of my body hitting against the walls, running through the floors, and everything is there... and you hear that I was there, but you're too late.

Then I'll be doing drawing, I'll be showing my books, and some new videotapes, and a lot of big drawings that I have in mind, which have all to do with energy, about the changing of my gestural energy and so I'm going to do a lot of them in physical scale... so it's about using the body, as a tool to make the visual image with. It's like when you see vandalism or you see an accident and the people are gone but you see what they have left. You can tell what had happened... it's like with the piano piece when I finished it and people came in and saw blood on the keys, they didn't know what I had done. But they could sense that something had happened... a ghost had done something and left blood. Unfortunately, it wasn't a ghost, ghosts don't have blood. So it's about that on a larger scale. That's where a lot of pieces are going now.