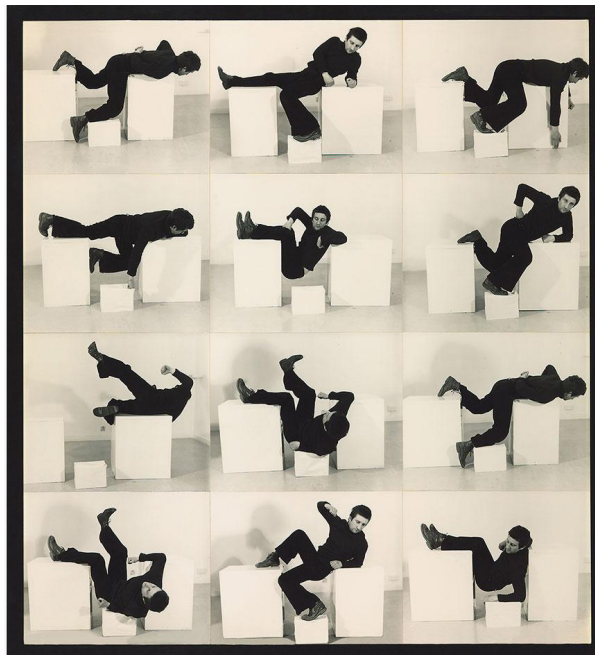


Interview

Bruce McLean's best photograph: fun with three plinths the Tate forgot to take back

Interview by Karin Andreasson

'People call what I do performance art. But I'd rather be thought of as a dancer. I'm a very good dancer'



📷 Bruce McLean Pose Work for Plinths 3, 1971. On show at Tate Britain. Photograph: Bruce McLean. Courtesy Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

My interest in plinths goes back to my student days at St Martin's School of Art in the early 1960s. We were told that sculpture should go on the floor and not on plinths or pedestals - but I wasn't going to be told what to do.

Later, in 1971, I was invited by Situation, an art space off Brook Street in London, to make a show; the idea was to change the exhibition every one or two days. I was an action sculptor at the time, making "impersonations" of sculptures. My throwaway pieces existed in the street and weren't made for a gallery. As a conceptual artist, I wanted to get rid of the object.

Some people would call what I did "performance art", but I don't like the term. I'm a sculptor who makes live work, and I was trying to develop the nature of what sculpture could be. I'd rather be thought of as a dancer than as a performance artist - and I'm a very good dancer.

The Guardian, April 2016

Tanya Leighton

“ People think I'm lampooning Henry Moore - but I did that in another work called Fallen Warrior”

I went to the Tate and managed to borrow about 50 plinths from the basement. I put photographs from magazines of desirable objects, like a hairdryer or a wristwatch, on top of the plinths. After a few days I shipped the plinths back to the Tate, but there were three left behind. I thought: what can I do with them?

I started playing around, and thought it would be quite interesting to get on them. I was thinking about how the plinths affected me; I tried to let the plinths determine where I put my foot or my arm. It became a pose work, an action that I did throughout the day. Somebody photographed me and I liked how that looked. People always think it's lampooning Henry Moore, but I actually did that with a piece called Fallen Warrior, where I'm lying on the beach.

Situation encouraged this kind of behaviour - it enabled young artists to try things out without any financial pressure, or a bums-on-seats approach. Nobody would have minded what I did. Conceptual art wasn't very popular at the time and new art was completely unseen by most people. On a typical opening you'd get two men from Art & Project magazine and gallery in Amsterdam, a man from Italy, a few artists and a couple of strays.

“ I got unbelievably drunk before one show, but people only demanded half their money back - because the pianist was good”

Pose Work for Plinths was just one of many pieces, but it seems to have become my hit record, and it was instrumental in helping me move on to other things. I got very interested in architecture and in how you behave in different spaces. It led to thinking about posing, and it's the reason I started Nice Style with students from Maidstone College of Art - we were a “pose band” who didn't play instruments, but just posed.

Hardly anyone was at our most famous action, High Up on a Baroque Palazzo, but lots of people saw the photograph. I realised that the action hardly mattered, but the photograph was really important. Most things we see are received through a photographic image, whether it's TV or a magazine. So an artwork could go straight to a magazine, where people would see it, and it would cut out the gallery.

There's a line in a John Cooper Clarke song: “If I could have one wish I'd be a photograph.” I really like that.