

TRIPLE AAA MYCOLOGICAL HISTORY

Matt Middleton

Culture swarms. That gnarley mycological descent into winter: First frosts, first slurries. First feel-up. First Blood. And while you're at it son ... please ... bleed for me and *only* me. The city of *sin*. Dunedin. Dunedin warmth – Dunedin hands. Ugly, ugly and even uglier.

Anyone for tennis?? A tv party? Lacrosse? Badminton? Shall we break into the Forsyth Barr coliseum and streak naked across the pitch to the mocking applause of the mighty Dunedin Police? Yes! All that and more, Jorge! Bottoms up!

Triple A – where the body is the medium. Andre Stitt, an intense and spritely Belfastian living in Cardiff, tears meaning into bacon strips and defies all codes. Alastair MacLennan, a Scotsman living in Belfast, places banana skins atop his head and offers up autumnal leaves – his is a sagely grace. There is a sense of absolute freedom – of the old Thelemic method – any whim expressed, one's will exposed and 'actuated.' These men are the invited guests of conceptual artist Adrian Hall, a Cornishman who has made Aramoana his home. These men are old colleagues but, more importantly, old friends. They talk of careers and communities, galleries and fluid spatter, the finer points of Gaelic performance art, war stories and close encounters, of the natural and the preternatural, of institutions and surviving them. This is wisdom.

I can't report on the daily(!) performances aside from the flailing dada that was the 'press conference' (it was flailing and dadaesque) – and a truck accident on state highway 88 blocked my path en route to their last soiree – which I am told was madness (flailing and dadaesque even) – but I can convey my impressions from their talks and presentations.

MacLennan presented video and stills from recent installation/performances which he coins *actuations*. He is present in each installation, as ghost or statue or slime mould. His body is usually enshrouded in all manner of detritus – earth, rubbish, meat, roots ... These sittings are feats of absolute endurance, of encasement, of concentration, of meditation. Becoming earth. The Alastair MacLennan signature is an item placed on his monkish head, perhaps there to aid concentration, to enhance poise. In any event, each and every item MacLennan uses is a potent symbol. A charm.

As a zealous consumer of Eastern philosophy, certain motifs used in MacLennan's video *The Alchemist* resonated deeply within me. Shot in the primordial grey/green of the Scots forest, *The Alchemist* documented what seemed like several days' worth of quasi-druidic nature ritual. Artist and cohorts assuming arcane forms, mirroring movements of the elements and elementals, cupping waters, lithification of forms, the tearing of wool and bracken. A natural minimalism – the minimalism of universal movement unchallenged and unfettered by human intention – left to move as it moves. *The Alchemist* focussed on tiers of temporality – those occurring on the forest floor; those occurring in streams, moments, lifetimes, death, rebirth, the dissolution of watery forms, bubbles, carcasses, skin, bone, morning dew.

If MacLennan is Gnostic sage, then Stitt is Celtic warlord. We are subjected to his tightly packed energy right from the get-go as he entered the press conference sporting a sinister pair of dark aviators and protected by bribed art-student-as-security – not a word – just enter, sit and begin tearing strips out of A4 paper, strip after strip. I think of structure and code and paper-as-template, as control. He tears it up. This is the artist who, in the midst of war-torn Belfast, pours petrol over his paintings and sets light to them. His was the slogan, “Art is not a mirror; it’s a fucking hammer.”

Since making these gestures, he has built a career that has earned him the reputation as one of Europe’s foremost performance artists. He held a talk on his famous residence-slash-gallery, Trace, in Cardiff. The home of blood painting, extreme golf, menstruation-as-art and of course Stuart Brisley’s “curator of a shit” show ... *Salò*, eat your asshole out. Trace became an art piece in itself as Stitt & friends built replicas of the entire building in various locations worldwide as part of the “Trace Displaced” project. Wherever the crew went, there was what could loosely be called construction and ultimately deconstruction ... mess, detritus, ‘traces,’ memories, flotsam, jetsam, jissom, the beloved gallery re-made readymade cookie cutter cut-out do-or-die performance art cluster fuckery. His is punk industrial energy. I believe the *piece de resistance* of the daily performances here in Dunedin was Stitt cutting the word ‘Norn lrn’ in caps along his left forearm. Flamin’ heck. Slayer! Missed some painful fun there, I’ll be bound.

... which brings us to the Cornish Kiwi resident Adrian Hall, who first arrived here in 1971 as artist-in-residence at Elam, after a stint stateside.

He has shown his work alongside Hotere and McCahon (who?), performed at the National Gallery in the early ‘80s, is about as (other)worldly as you can get, having travelled to scores of lands and cities and villages including Ireland and the US, and was artist-in-residence at our beloved Dunedin Art School in 1999 where he experimented with textual semiotics and radio art.

I asked Hall to describe how he ‘found’ the triple A experience. “Your pesky questions – one good answer to them all would be ‘I dunno.’”

Matt: What performative/aesthetic/philosophic objectives/tropes/motifs did you have in mind for AAA?

Adrian: Two weeks of escalating trust, and for each of us utterly pushing what we had each been about. No compromise. We visited our individual histories and dug ‘em up and tossed them over again.

Knowing A1’s buzz-cut, and A2’s pate, I let my hair grow to the length which it was when I first knew them. Before I cut it off after a day in the barracks with the Army when I was photographed etc. 1976.



Figure 1: Lars Preisser, *Alastair MacLennan*, Ballpoint pen on paper, 2011.



Figure 2: Lars Preisser; *The General (André Stitt)*, Ballpoint pen and coloured pencil on paper; 2011.



Figure 3: Lars Preisser; *Balance (Alastair MacLennan)*, Ballpoint pen and coloured pencil on paper; 2011.

Objectively with AAA I moved from (fairly) straight man, in the suit, for the official press conference, to a deliberately scraggy, non-uniformed person intuiting actions from a heap of junk. They stole my best(!) suit and abused it in the space. And my best shirt and tie and f... wedding shoes. Testing the space, climbing into the roof, towing the ladder around, climbing up and round it on the floor – railing against André and shouting titles from one of his amazing paintings – “I’m Yer Mammy” – at him in a high-decibel mad screaming contest.

I found myself working through causal actions which caused monotonous or rhythmic sounds to mix in with the recorded-backwards male and female voices, which was a list of the names of all of the casualties in N.I. I was tramping around in a circle and deep breathing, kept in a tight circle by the off-megaphone mike on a cord, tin cans banging aggressively but rhythmically on their strings, which I was dragging at as I went widdershins – anti-clockwise, like the witches do – round and round. Unwinding these joint 35-year-old memories from our communal consciousness.

I busted out with ordinary things as well as the manic sergeant-major-shouting with A1, like highly polishing one work boot, shaving with an electric razor suspended from the ceiling or lying on the floor. We each went with a ‘dare’ attitude I think, but in that neat new space – the drawings of A1 & A2 on the walls and the sound, and the awful mess which became readable as a chart of our engagement, during the following week – was all quite outstanding in my experience anywhere.

Matt: The gist of your artist talk?

Adrian: It was meant to be about 'decoding' the detritus left behind in the gallery. Someone asked if my role was of a provocateur, and yes, I think it was, as each of us had that role. There was no anticipation, no rules, no leader. We seemed to happen, and the amount of history unfolding was an avalanche which we truly never anticipated. It was intense. It was full bore. I can only imagine that it would have been like a pale shadow of the feeling Elvin Jones and Trane, and Eric Dolphy felt – after one of those gigs not long before Dolphy died.

Matt: What would you liken the AAA experience to?

Adrian: Like a bath in Cornish clotted cream, drowned with Jameson's whiskey. Like a tiptoe through the tulips, like a hyper-adrenaline scrunch through the window-glass after a bombing campaign. We laughed like trains when we met up for about 24 hours solid. It was like playing with the grown-ups. There were no holds barred and there was no compromise. And from this experience and a *priori* knowledge, and very great trust and confidence, some kind of striated coherence emerged. Performance. Fragmentation. Slice, dice, sever, reattach, slash, hack, recompose. Anger, fury, loss. Rage and redemption and Rinzai.

Ultimately there was an aura of life-affirming positivity to these artists – to the visit as a whole. Here were men who have made a living out of the systematic expression of different hues of human madness – rituals and performances and psychic experimentation that would have had many 'put away.' But for them, it seems to have actualised deep personal and spiritual growth – they will make of the world what they will and that is final – art's arms are wide



Figure 4: Lars Preisser, *Triple AAA Performance*, Ballpoint pen and coloured pencil on paper, 2011.

open and welcome all psycho-social adventurers, well ... so long as there is included at least a micro-semblance of an 'artist statement.' I was re-invigorated. I applied their teachings to my world. "Use your intuition," MacLennan informed me in kindly Scots-Irish vernacular: The aesthetics rocked harder than ever the following weekend.

Thanks, Adrian, for bringing these creative forces over. I'm all the better for it, I hope the students of the art school are too ...

It's cold. And fervour dwindles. Where's the whiskey? 3Ds re-release *Swarthy Songs for Swabs*. And we turn it up in the car and you make out a crude version of the band made famous by *Helzapoppin*. And fervour is stimulated that little bit more. And fervour dwindles back into its shell. There's always something to do. Someone to save. Someone to love. Something to pick up. Something to clean up. Something to bleach. We decide not to visit Auschwitz.

Matt Middleton is a recording artist based in Melbourne and Dunedin. Going by the moniker "Crude", he has an extensive back-catalogue of works spanning the worlds of lo-fidelity, noise and it's various associations and releases on Flying Nun, Ecstatic Yod, Ecstatic Peace, Artless Intent. Matt plays an active role in promoting innovative audio culture and appears on many recordings by New Zealand bands and artists in a supporting role.

Andre Stitt

<http://www.tracegallery.org>

Alastair MacLennan

<http://vads.ahds.ac.uk/collections/maclennan/>

Adrian Hall, born in Cornwall, has taught at the Royal College, London, Yale School of Architecture, and lectured at U.C.L.A. He has continually pushed back the boundaries of convention and shown artworks in public regularly since 1960. He has worked with time-based media, installed works, drawing, writing, performed-gestures and actions. He is the current Artist Adjunct to the Dunedin School of Art in 2012.

<http://www.imageandtext.org.nz/adrian-bricks>