# ROLFE, PERFORMANCE AND RITUAL

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INTRODUCTION

Nigel Rolfe has been widely acclaimed in the Art World for a number of years as a Sculptor and especially as a performance artist. His performances have been multifaceted, using video monitors, large screen video projection, sound and lighting alongside live performances.

Music has also been an accompaniment to the visual imagery of his live performances. The material is written and produced by Rolfe and his songs are a mixture of personal, social and a political commenting on contemporary issues.

Much of Rolfe's performances are based on a stringent questioning of the purpose meaning and value of accepted Art, and his earlier work through an investigative process proved to be shocking and anti destructive.

Rolfe has sought to avoid the self indulgence of so many contemporary performance artists, with the intention of informing and challenging his audience. However facets of his work are inevitably self regarding because of its very nature, that is the artist redefining boundaries, in resting his personal ideas with a universal significance.

"Over the years, Rolfe's work has through dedication and commitment matured. While the performances still depend for their effect on a degree of personal intensity, his experience and professionalism enable him to develop aspects of his work with increased awareness". This thesis looks at the development of Nigel Rolfe from being a sculptor to being a performance artist. Rolfe's interpretation of performance art are considered; his reappropriation of ancient myths and rituals, his enactment of the relation between spirit and matter, dissolving into a process revealing a struggle between self and society.

Rolfe's work has a reflective nature scanning between past and present through explorative and at times, frenzied means.

The work of Nigel Rolfe provides us with a sense of the artist as a sha manic figure who desires to reveal and rediscover a particular sense of awareness.

His performances draw the spectator into a heightened participation and through the use of symbol and the role he has adopted, he attempts to provoke a different order of understanding in art.

I will attempt to discover the purpose and intent behind this work.

This thesis is based on interviews held with Nigel Rolfe on Friday January 25th and on Friday February 1st 1991. Included in Appendix I are a series of questions relevant to the interviews. Unedited tapes are also available.

#### CHAPTER 1

## AN OUTLINE OF ROLFE'S BACKGROUND; SCULPTURE TO PERFORMANCE

Coming from a rural working class background, Rolfe began by working with materials that were natural to him. The materials he likeswere materials that made sense to him. When he thought of using people to make live work, it was very natural to him.

Rolfe raises a political question of how people consider sculpture. Temporary things have always interested him, for example, he believe sculpture is like a fountain, the water moving in the fountain, the moment the water is removed, there is no fountain. He sees fountain shapes as very physical, very sculptural even though they are always in motion, he sees them as temporary.

Rolfe believes it is really a question of what people judge sculpture to be. To him the act of process is more important than the object which remains. In an essay, Clement Greenberg discusses the dialogue between art and non-art and points out "that one of the characteristic donations of original art was its propensity to assimilate non-art into itself. The notion of art, put to the strictest test of experience, proves to mean not skilful making...but an act of mental distancing...any and everything can be subjected to such distancing and thereby converted into something that takes effect as art. The performance artist would claim that the whole process of the non-art objects assimilation into art is irrelevant,

because the emphasis on process and procedure denies the importance of the finished object. The inter-colutions between artist, place and audience circumvent the project".2.

Rolfe sees his work as an expression and channel for power mediating between past and present. He could be described as a kind of Sharman, not concerned with realistic representation but seeking from symbol or sign, its subject matter drawn from myth and magic.

His earlier work was nore rebellious and destructive. The work constituting sculpture adhering to scale and balance, which was then destroyed, for example, "Tower". This structure was reminiscent of the Irish Round Tower. Rolfe built wooden spiral shaped structures and demolished them by running headlong into them.

This kind of performance, its nature being determinedly aggressive, was designed to destroy rather than construct. It had a two-fold purpose - first the creation of sculpture that held within itself a monumental sense of balance and the second a subsequent provocatory destruction or collapse.

The lack of any kind of definition or following in performance art has proved to be advantageous in the development of fluidity and form. Performance is suited to experimentation in ways that traditional forms of object, sculpture could

never possibly define. However performance is possibly an extension of its possibilities despite what could be read as inaccessible and impermanent in Rolfe's work.

To Rolfe static and resistant objects are too slow. He wants to make some kind of greater urgency for the participants, audience and himself. He wants to ask questions that are very imme date and on time. The debate about work being across time is not always the main issue, it is more a notion of condensation or emergency; essentially a catharsis. Rolfe wants to grasp and gain the audience instantly and hold them in exactly the same memorable state as in the potential of any creative work. He wishes his images to have the same after-life as one would have humming a tune months after it was heard. The point being, that these images would be absorbed very instantly by the viewer.

It would seem Rolfe sees performance art as removed from the market place, in his oppositional views of the misreading of art, the market place and art practice but this is simply not true. That it is an art which has rendered its practitioners less vulnerable to financial or ideological take-over by forces beyond the artist's control is by the same token, an equally suspicious declaration. The operations of the art market are far too resistant and flexible to allow that to happen.

Performance often enforces barriers because it is inadequate in its own form. Rolfe believes in certain instances barriers are dissolved. He says it is a state of identity that people can relate with because they know that conclusions, moments or contradictions of moments have some equivalence in life for them. Rolfe feels he often dissolves barriers through performance because he values his work in a certain way, which allows him to find those 'precious' moments that people understand.

Rolfe believes there is a time in Work which the performer arrives at. A moment where a universal language is involved which can be useful, difficult or even uncomfortable for the audience. This he finds useful in communicating.

He believes art should be uncomfortable for the audience because he sees them as over-indulged, anaesethised. Rolfe says this element of uncomfortability arises out of not wanting to confirm what the audience thinks, but to question what he and the audience thinks. To define this questioning process he believes he must go beyond the bounds of what is reasonable or acceptable or plausible.

Perhaps Rolfe is trying to crack complacency in the spectator and to provoke the consciousness of the audience who have become accustomed by over exposure to violent extremes of behaviour in the media. By doing so, he often confronts the audience in a state of alienation subjecting himself to mental

and physical extremes. "It is the relationship between the audience and the participant where much of performance art's fusion takes place. There is the usual gap between the audience's understanding and the intention of the artist, the onlookers have a definite set of expectations which will lead to their embarrassment, division or humiliation. Sometimes the process is deliberately bland or banal. Often there is no discernable beginning or end, which compounds the process of puzzlement.

The frustration of the audience is completed when they are left with a whole series of questions. This is no violence, only exceptionally, and then it is of a very theatrical kind certainly not gracious unlike the situation in many kindred forms, where to be shocking and disturbing is almost an end in itself<sup>m</sup>.<sup>3.</sup>

Rolfe does not perceive performance as more of an articulation of life than a representation, but sees it as a question of quality. He does not believe the medium necessarily allows accession, but sees it as another possible experience. He says performance art is always a medium which has to fight for its identity, because of a particular historic view about the danger of it, or what it claims for itself, whereas painting and sculpture do not struggle in quite the same way. He sees escapism in certain values they are given, purely because of what they are.

Rolfe wants to break away from the syndrome of art as a commodity, and what he labels the false value structure of the art - market because he wishes to make a very intimate engagement with a number of people.

The theory being "The performance artist's firm conviction that process is superior to product; and that the artefact is an anachronism which fails to describe the emotions, sensations and sensory perceptions which are an integral part of the manufacture of the finished product. The performance artist wishes to see and feel what occurs during the course of artisitc creation, rather than retrospectively view the process of verification or gaze in artificial surroundings at the end product".<sup>4</sup>.

Rolfe believes the problem lies in the 'power' involved in image-making, that is the belief in who you are, and that you hold some kind of potency and the egocentricity involved in that process. The performance artist regarding himself, as an extension of humanity in the mass. "An individual pursuing into physicality the fanciful imaginings of everyone by virtue of a more priveleged existence and developed vision that the majority of people can afford to possess".<sup>5</sup>. The main issues concerning art as an extension of life, not its economic value.

"If the function of the art object was to be an economic one, then the conceptual work initially designed to oppose that

market could have no such use. In these terms performance has been considered an extension of the non-utilitarian ethic; on the one hand, it is intangible and leaves no traces to be consumed by commercialism, and on the other it reduces the alienation between producer and consumer since both audience and performer experience the piece simultaneously."6.

#### REDWEDGE, BRIDGE (1978-1980)

Between the 3rd and 15th of July 1978 Rolfe wedged a red stack of timber between floor and ceiling in the ACNE Gallery in London (Fig. 1). Daily a quantity of timber was cut and stacked into 3' square column, red clay grog was used to bind these sections of wood together. Building props were used to keep the mass secure and the structure was built at a slight angle to the vertical to enable it to eventually be wedged between floor and ceiling. Eventually the ceiling was lifted and the column tightly wedged, the props were removed and the lifted ceiling held the sculpture. The red wedge weighed three tons.

Every day Rolfe made a record of development and the photographs were placed alongside the sculpture. A grid of one hundred photographs described the complete process of the work.

A parallel work Bridge (Fig. 2) was built two years later, when a horizontal stack of the same timber was wedged between the two columns. In the initial proposal for the red wedge Rolfe made this statement:

"A textural ballet of the bringing together of a sculpture. A process of public working of building up, not a performance, but a sculpture in motion, using texture, balance, fluids, wood and the atmosphere, an installed sculpture". These works were an attempt to find a method of working publicly whereby a sculpture is achieved as a specific installed work in full view of the audience.

This work is considered by Rolfe, not as live performance in itself but as a necessary working ritual to achieve a specific installed sculpture. He believes that contemporary culture places too much emphasis on the art object and that the ideas and process are often obscured. He says his work is concerned with cycles across time and demonstrations with materials, so by building in this way they could be seen as model making extending the idea of making a kit, but physically doing the work, which is constructional sculpture. These works are considered as characterized symbol structure. Importance placed more on the bringing about of an object than the actual object itself.

To Rolfe sculpture is how the artist directs the material in a given space and all conditions of this process are of equal importance. "I want to create interaction of matieral and space by using my body". He sees himself as a demonstrator of visual changes and has described his work as sculpture in motion. "It interests me that sculpture is generally considered as static and why for example dust and fluids are seldom used for making art".

Rolfe believes by working in this way, the distance between art materials and audience will be greatly reduced, in that the audience identify feelings he says is beyond a language identification. He feels people are usually very intelligent and sensitive about his work. But that the audience responds to the way it is treated. Rolfe believes the audience will react and make its own mind up about the work involved

regardless of what it is called and of its terms and references.

Rolfe has always achieved things by repetition or cycles, of laying down some kind of ground. In many ways it is like a buddist Zen ritual in that he must lay down the background before he does the foreground and he must apply this series of thought by repetition, by ritual.

This excessive justification was what could only be described as a false confidence for Rolfe, the belief if his work was continuously repeated people would begin to believe it. Rolfe now says his work is more impulsive and there is a greater emergency in his dialetics, even though there still appears to be a repetitive element to it.

The actual statement Red Wedge comes from the Russian painter Malevitch alluding to the constructivist wedge. It is a very particular communist, socialist statement about driving a red wedge into the capitalist world. Rolfe's awareness of the constructivist red wedge also connects with its political attitudes.

He believes there were many other benefits to this piece of work for example the idea of driving into a physical white cube Gallery disturbing the balance in the Gallery, and the idea of labour through sheer physical effort. Bridge similarly had those connotations for example the notion of building a brdige in a divided community. Rolfe stresses

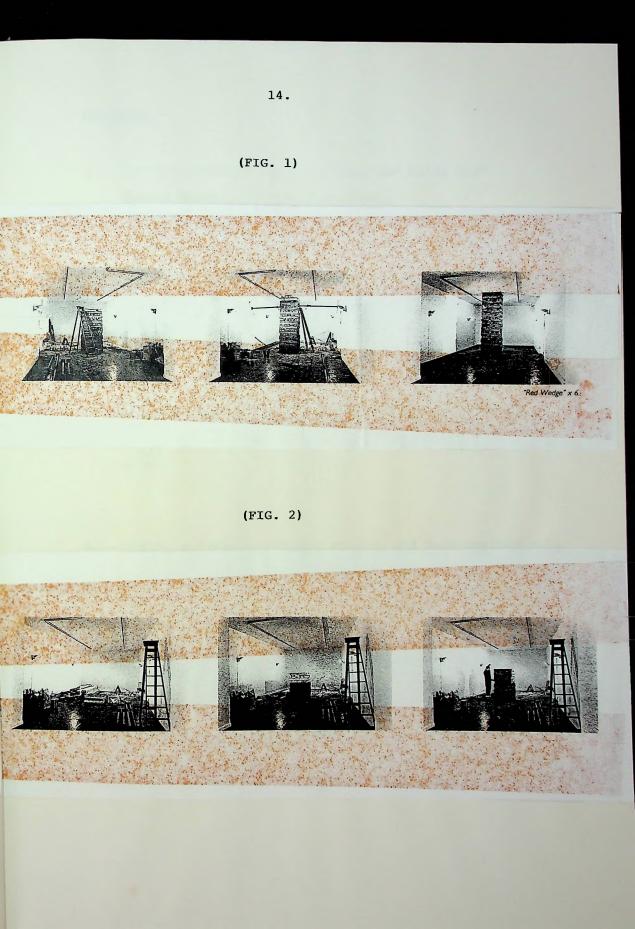
these elements were only by-products to the central act of describing their construction publicly .

Rolfe sees his work as sculpture although he is primarily interested in the time and space where person and materials meet. Rolfe' work which is 'performance' in the broadest sense has involved 'real time' acts of physical stress, the body in confrontation with elemental and environmental conditions, pushed to the limits of endurance to prove his seriousness.

The duration of the work, which needed to last a certain length of time was intended to affect the audience, achieving greater contact with them perhaps falsely conscious of them by holding their attention, demanding their response, and playing on their emotions.

Having interacted his body with material and space, creating a balance, the work was finished with a violent collapse.A nihilistic approach was very important to Rolfe at that time. He sees it as relating to his responsibility as a man trying to prove his sexual prowess.

Rolfe now believes since having had children the need to impose upon himself warrior-like tests of endurance gradually lessened and his performance methodology has become more eceletic.



#### FOOTNOTES

- Lorna Donlon, "Playing the Game the Rolfe Way" Sunday Times. (26th August 1984).
- Hugh Adams, "Against a Definitive Statement on British Performance Art" Performance Magazine, Vol. No. 15, Spring/Summer '82, p.4.
- 3. Roselee Goldberg, "Performance The Art of Notation", High Performance, Vol. No. 15. Spring/Summer '82, p.54
- Caroline Tisdall, "Stuart Brisley and Mark Chaimowicz", High Performance, Vol. 9, p.15, 1986.
- 5. Ibid.
- 6. Adams, p.4.

CHAPTER II GROUND DRAWINGS

## GROUND DRAWINGS (1978-1980)

In ground drawings (Fig. 1) Rolfe laid down a ground covering of white flour, and on it made a series of configurations of lines, crosses and triangles, using soot as black pigment.

"With the drawing, the movement of the artist's body included frontal drawing, drawing front and back, rolling, turning and sliding in the material. The structure of the movements is usually an organised cycel: for example a line, circle or a spiral, with always complete physical contact between the figure and the material."<sup>1</sup>.

Rolfe feels the way in which he has treated these images pertain to the hierarchy in terms of their formal treatment and the way certain things are adhered to in terms of materiality and structure.

It may not be coincidental that the pigments used were derivatives of grain and fire, both fundamentally important to archaic societies. The materials and performance dictate each other - the impermanence of both. Because of this two-tone layering, there is also primarily a balance between artist and material, then a mix-tranferral to another state, an involvement with the material.

"When updating the mediating functions of the body, performances refer back to numerous primitive ceremonies, in particular to magic. The tribal magician used his body ritually for the most diverse purposes, the devotion of the

community and the enchantment of the sorcerer's actions, were not only at the service of practical ends; many of these ceremonies had as their objective the greater cohesion of the group, the contribution of standards of behaviour".<sup>2</sup>.

The magicians of today in what art has rescued from ancient cultures, offer spectacles which differ from the others. By offering that possibility of aspiring new horizons, which always concern creativity and the certainty of finding ourselves in a preess of change and mutation overcoming the static condition and social conventions.

"There is no other appelation for the performer than that of semiotic magician. An operator of signs which become such in the course of a generally unforeseen ritual. Here resides the strongest bond between these expenences and the real history of mankind, the opportunity for a re-encounter from the stigma point of art for a magic which is constituted by acting on signs and meanings".<sup>3.</sup>

"The undrawing action of the ground drawings was energized by the ambivalence at its core. Rolfe considered his ground drawings as a carpet of magic and them as precious, evocative images. Indeed their formal resemblance to ritual Navahao and Corobee drawings was relatively obvious, like the Tibitan mandelas, they both invited and were fruits of meditation. It was all the more subversive, then, when Rolfe took it upon himself to destroy the images immediately after their creation".<sup>4.</sup>

"And although the 'undrawing' which Rolfe soon began to undertake in the nude implied an anguished need to absorb the markings symbolic power (literally through the skin), they were undeniably nihilisitic in effect. This uneasy discordance similated a struggle between ideal and real self and precisely because it was never resolved, the battle remained the touchstone of the performance's artistic potency. The most dramatic of these works were probably the powerful 'Kamp drawings' where water was admized to the pigments, and 'Across the Water'; a related piece that was performed on a raised glass platform at the Pompidou Centre".<sup>5</sup>.

In all these performances Rolfe's body was crucial, at once the spring from which every gesture drew its force, and the focus of the audiences attention. Thus the 'ground drawings' contained strong, perhaps unavoidable elements of narcissism. Yet in its midity, the artist's body was an image of openess and vulnerability. Rolfe draws parallels from the earlier wooden constructions to the rolling, crawling process, simply the dust became the balance of the previous wood, so the dust was a convenient structure. One laid on another in parallel to what the previous wood used to be.

The majority of Rolfe's 'ground drawings' were founded on the notion of a return to a mythical life source, and on a kind of nostalgia for elemental power. Rolfe's political understanding of this was the idea of building territory which he placed himself in, i.e. one's own dream landscape. The tendancy more recently has been to focus on Rolfe's body as the landscape.

In these works Rolfe used his body on what he describes as a 'glass world' a glass table or platform (as above), even a field for the body. These elements were very much derived from his background, the idea of being at the edge of a field. He says he crosses a field as he would look at a ground drawing, from A to B. He describes the drawings as a territory for building an imaginary civilization, he says they are states of aging, movement; dusts and fluids.

Rolfe believes many of his images are concerned with and have dealt with aging in a certain way, physically in terms of an image, and the views the artist presents to the audience. Rolfe believes he alienates his audience, due to the intense seriousness of his work, wanting to be serious about serious things.

Rolfe's understanding of temporality in his art is a wish for the experience of it. The journey being more important than the arrival. It is a statement both politically and socially. It is much more important to convey the message in terms of art language.

Using a quote from Frank Zappa, Rolfe says "You can go beyond your audience". Which, does happen sometimes, depending on the extremity of the situation the performer is in.

Rolfe works in extremes with regard to the range of symbolism he uses and its accessibility to the audience. He works from extremely blatant images made particularly for the notion of reaching as many people as gut level as possible. He can work from this point to esoteric undecipherable texts and feelings.

He sees performance as an artifice, a false moment made for a false event. It is not real life, because reality is largely more interesting in that it touches feelings, moments, humanity. He strives to touch these 'live' feelings in his work. He says it is a destruction of arrogance, which he wishes to be more effective, and the only point it is making is that it is artificial.

Lucy Lippard has said "Rituals reveal values at their deepest level. Men express in ritual what moves them most, she sees in the study of rituals a key to the understanding of the essential constitution of societies".<sup>6</sup>.

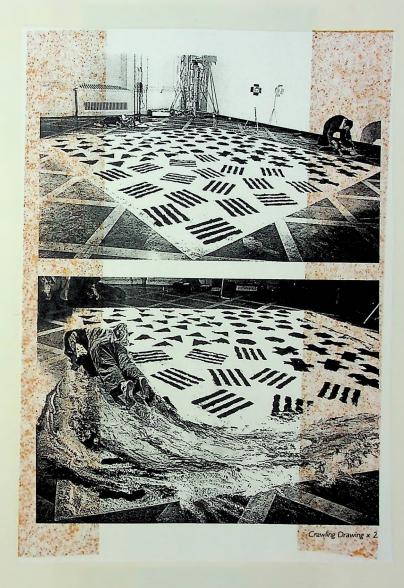
Ritual interests Rolfe very much in terms of the notion of ritual-repetition in primal societies, primary culture as opposed to secondary culture. Why people go through the same action, why people call ritual a repeated action to achieve release or a secondary state.

He sees ritual as a sense of will, not through repetition but as an interesting condition - "I will therefore I am". Rolfe wants his art to be radical because he sees Art practice by and large as a stubborn, lazy, indifferent, uninteresting subject. Too many clinical rooms filled with guards and great mounds of steel. He sees no sense in the fact that people treat them as shrines, which he says is a complete contradiction to art and what should be happening.

6



CRAWLING DRAWING





RAMP DRAWINGS -4

Ramp Drawings x 4.

## (FIG. 5)

## SERIES OF PIGMENT DRAWINGS









## PERFORMANCE AS CEREMONY

Throughout Rolfe's work, performance as Catharsis and Celebration is cyclical. There is a distinct difference between a point of criticism or a negative overview to a stage where he wanted to celebrate life. His work on one hand has been very critical of society and mankind, but on the other it is celebrative, some sense of joy shed by life experiences.

Rolfe believes the notion of making an occasion where live images are used with an audience present is a form of ceremony and celebration because the performer engages in a kind of union with the audience. He believes his role in making ritual art is a process through which he is confronting and overcoming material and social conventions. One could look at it as a 'crutch' or support. If the performer is inhibited or embarrassed at performing in front of people, if he repeatedly performs he will overcome it. As if by repetition he can build up confidence and justify his actions.

Rolfe now sees it as a long confirmed habit of performing and feels if he no longer performed it would be more positive for him. However, he enjoys the criteria of performance art, that it is vital, and free from a certain set of rules and conventions which he does not wish to be bound to.

The element of ritual in Rolfe's work is an attempt to reach out from a position of isolation and alienation attempting to create something which is common with the audience. He identifies other rituals in his life which are utilized, in his art, whether it be the ritual of religion, sex or many other activities in his life, he uses them to convey what art is to him.

Rolfe sees art as a craft. Having repeated much of his work over a period of time he knows when it is successful. He knows where to direct himself and how to make a balance of danger and the ritual process to Rolfe all of which combine to make an alchemy of emotions. He sees the act of taking risk or giving it as the magic in much of life's experience, experience which relies on a certain sort of risk taking, to know just how far one can go and the mistakes one can afford to make, with the ability and confidence to take those risks with the audience.

"Another consequence of the development of Rolfe's work is the demystification of his role as an artist in acknowledgement of more varied functions - those of imagemaker, conveyor of insights, poser of questions and even that of entertainer. Some would define the task of the image maker as one of selection from a store of images received in that person's lifetime via artifacts, the media and in every day life. The problem is seen as one

of appropriateness and accuracy in the illustration of an idea to make soemthing 'in the image of' - a pursuit of truth through likeness. The image in and of itself having a kind of transparency transformed into meaning by the purpose of the user".<sup>7</sup>.

#### FOOTNOTES

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- 2. Chantal Pontbriand (ed)., "Performance Text(es) and Documentation. Parachute, 1981.
- Anthony Howell, Elements of Performance Art, London, 1977.
- 4. N. Rolfe, William Furlong, John Hutchinson, Declan McGonigle, Nigel Rolfe, Sculptures in Motion, p.26.
- 5. Ibid.
- 6. Lucy Lippard, Overlay.
- 7. Nigel Rolfe, Sculptures in Motion, p.20.

CHAPTER III

JUNGLE

### JUNGLE

In 1983 the ground drawings method was altered to working on stretched, dampened cotton canvas, again with dry pigment in a series called Shroud Hangings whereby the same concepts and methods were applied, Rolfe says as with ground drawings, the work acted as the landscape for body actions to further extend the image.

The Shroud series developed by incorporating sound, slides and lighting using these techniques, developing one of the central concerns of his work a ritualized structure.

This theme has been extended through related works, Repetition is a non-traditional art form resulting in ritual. Time, space and movement are used as repeating elements using the same media of stretched cotton canvas and dry pigment.

In Jungle (Fig. I) Rolfe emphasised repetition in his movements in a formally repeated series of actions, placing removing one body and four leaf stencils on and from the canvas shaking out the pigment and removing the remaining pigment ... "The ethically relating sound track was employed to add to the structural development of the piece party by including the traibally based repetitive rythms and partly by altering the thematic group of sounds to another. The sound track thus corresponded to the completion or alteration of particular parts of Rolfe's activities, for example, the

transition from dampening the canvas to applying the pigments. The development of the soundtrack was therefore employed to strengthen the sense of ritual.

The function of the sounds was closely linked to that of the slide projection, which simultaneously showed two images side by side. All of the images were of tribal activities mainly connected with ritualistic groups, or individuals whose appearance clearly showed in dress, scar marks or decoration their tribal affiliation. All the slides showed non-Europeans.

Thus one of Rolfe's main concerns was to create a clear sense of structure and ritual in a form of activity, which he was in the process of evolving. To emphasise this he formalised his own movements".<sup>1.</sup>

Rolfe's concerns in this work were also to reveal the source material which he had believed in for a long time prior to this work, such as the writings of Claude Levi Strauss where the idea of humanity is described as a primitive contemporary creature, for example: he says "To most of us ethnology appears to be a new science, a result of subtlety and inquisitiveness of modern man. Primitive objects took their place in our aesthetics less than fifty years ago. And if our interest in the customs and beliefs of savages goes back a little further, the first works systematically devoted to them hardly predate 1860. This was the time when Darwin posed the problem of

biological evolution which corresponded, in the minds of his contemporaries to the problem of man's social and intellectual evolution.

Yet therein lies a dangerous illusion insofar as it deceives us about the real place occupied in our view of the world by the knowledge of distant peoples. Ethnology is neither a seperate science nor a new one. It is the most ancient, most general form of what we designate by the name of humanism<sup>n</sup>.<sup>2</sup>.

Rolfe wanted to stand up alongside and declare these images which he feels were like having a profound sense of himself.

This source material Rolfe found very difficult to 'shelter' under as the images were so powerful in themselves that perhaps an awareness of this cultural exploitation gradually increases to a level at which it begins to interfere with Rolfe's intentions.

Having never worked with such a scale of projections and images used before, one of his main aims was to show himself in light of the projections. It was like the projections reflecting on him, and Rolfe trying to declare himself honestly by being naked and white, with the color on him and the sound and projections behind him, Rolfe wanted to override the issue of declaring, of saying "I want to be a primitive person" or "I want to extend my sexuality to the point where I can do this in public". By doing so he wanted to reveal a 'raw' side of himself.

Rolfe says it is quite ambivalent who benefits from these ritualistic performances. But he believes it can only answer itself in how strong the imagery is, and he sees himself just as an image-maker.

"In Jungle apart from representing culture which the contemporary western one is encroaching upon, the ritual depicted in the slides is wholly integrated in these societies. Performance has taken them out of their own milieu and used them solely for a limited function, to indicate the artists fundamental concerns in his own work, and to enhance his own visual display. Beyond showing aspects of ritualism in cultures unrelated to this one, the particular tribal societies have no further role. They are employed for one and only one relatively limited comparison, and everything making up their existence is made to be irrelevant.

This sense of people functioning as objects takes on an aspect of voyeurism. In the sense of travelogue, the figures become increasingly colourful and exotic as the slides continue to be shown in their repeated but varied sequences. What again is disturbing for the work is that a developing sense of ethnic differences begins to push aside and then overpower ritual".3. Rolfe says what makes him a post-modern de-constructed person in this world is his ability to chose to dream. He does not have to perform in a certain way or answer to a certain moralism. Perhaps it is arrogance or socialism or maybe he is saying if one has to care, they are tied to a certain history.

Rolfe says there is no moral government of what one can and cannot do and he feels he does not take what is tribal, culture but takes elements, uses those which he decides belong to him.

Quite controversially he believes our whole history western cultural values are based on taking from other cultures. Rolfe does not hold a moral position about plaguerising in this way, as he does not know if he can stand up and be a judge to them.

"The moderns looked back to precapitalist cultures for models of integrated social orders and artistic practices commensurate with them, but the postmodern anxiety drives us to greater extremes of historical fantasy. We richochet among the various contemporary images of the end of history the continuous present of the media, on the one hand and the final anihilation of th enuclear holocaust, on the other and only in the most ancient past can we find images adequate to our need and our despair. Therefore on all levels of cultural practice from pop movies such as quest for fire to rewritings of art history such as Lucy Lippard's Ovelay, the prehistoric is rediscovered as a vocabulary of utopianism.

Interest in indigenous American society has appeared in current american art in the pseudo-aboriginal body markings of Keith Haring and in Charles Simond's microillims. A similar revival interest in the monuments of Celtic Europe, especially Britain has allowed barrows and dolmens to be appropriated in affirmations of localism, agrarianism and mysticism that have also aspired to a political function. Performance art is no stranger to this gestalt, and all along it has made its pitch next to orthodox sixties rituals of wholeness and centredness. Rolfe works within the parameters of this political function and his performance displays its characteristic strengths and limitations".<sup>4.</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

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- 3. Mulcahy, p.p. 23-24.
- Hugh Adams, "Against A Definitive Statement", High Performance, Vol. No. 6.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROPE THAT BINDS US MAKES THEM FREE

# THE ROPE THAT BINDS US MAKES THEM FREE

"Works of Art emerge out of a complex dialogue between self and society, individual concerns of the 'Art World' and so forth. The artist may choose to embed his or her work into the mainstream of contemporary art, which often results in a tendancy towards formalism and the attempt to carry one particular aspect of already existing art 'one step further'.

But the artist may also choose to turn inward, in a sense to investigage the relationship between self and society, self and history. In short the artist may choose to examine the position of self in the world".1.

# THE ROPE THAT BINDS US MAKES THEM FREE

To a backdrop of large screens, one green, one white, one orange, accompanied by an electronic sound track an enormous concrete cross looms behind the screens. At this point Kolfe emerged, blue lamps shone on him, he hurls handfuls of flour in the air each handful accompanied by a flash of strobe lighting, slides of ancient Irish monuments are projected into the central screen cromlechs, round towers and celtic crosses. Three large videos stand in front of the screens. On the first against a green background Rolfe's head is filmed facing an enormous ball of farmers twine. He winds it around his head.

The second monitor shows an Irish dance on a white background, framed from the waist down, a girl in black tights and a celtic skirt dances a jig, the camera lights and editing add an obscure kind of eroticism to the piece. The music builds up, and against an orange background on the third monitor, Rolfe's face is seen with a bucket of water hurled at it, again and again... As the music gets louder Rolfe has been painting a large canvas on the floor with white paint on a horizontal canvas in front of the audience. On it a stencil of an outline of a map of Ireland which he filled with green pigment ; then he placed another stencil by a man's body and filled it with orange powder, the figure is stylized like a forensic drawing to mark the

position of the murder victim.

Rolfe then stretches himself over the orange figure shifting himself violently against it sweeping his arm across the canvas to smear the orange of the body colour. At this point a slide show, which had introduced and accompanied the performance with the images of celtic monuments and the words of continuously evolving concrete pour came to a conclusion, by leaving on the eall its enigmatic words "The Rope/That Binds Us/Makes Them Free".

The starting point of the work involves Nigel drawing upon some external source, external in the sense of being outside the realm of purely aesthetic concerns. This external source is usually some personal and/or political experience. He then develops an image which reflects his response to this experience. (The source of this image, the personal/political experience is never given explicitly to the audience in the form of program notes). The image is transformed into a visual event, in other words an image that takes place in time. The vehicle for the image is inevitably his own body.

Nigel enters with a large ball of rope, sits in a chair lit by a single spotlight and prepares himself mentally for about one minute. He begins to bind his head holding the ball of twine with one hand and wrapping it around his head with the other. As he continues to bind the sound of organ music

punctuating chords can be heard. Working to the rhythm of the organ chords, his facial features gradually disappear and his breathing becomes audible.

"Given the dominant issues of the performance, especially those on the three t.v. monitors that accompanied the central action with the tapes of an Irish folk dance and of Rolfe's own body art, which repeated the green, orange and white of the Irish flag it is inevitable that we interpret this statement politically, or its personal significance, his deliberate attempts to make himself an Englishman to Irish. Culture and his feelings of vulnerability or perhaps that he is the orange man outside of the map and will never be part of our culture".<sup>2</sup>.

The personal significance in 'the rope' for Rolfe was as a transition a particular move from the african tribal imagery. It was very necessary for Rolfe to make soemthing which was localised and to try and expand the basis of his ability to bring a concept to fruition, as opposed to working from emotion, whereas Jungle for Rolfe had been very much an attempt to put physicality to passion resulting in quite a passionate erotic work, by erotic meaning the body, or the spirit of the body and the 'Rope' was more the spirit of the mind.

The work was an attempt by Rolfe to analyse his position living in Ireland as a working class protestant and trying to celebrate what is represented to him, and in doing so

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being quite contentious. Dealing with repression; the idea of people repressing themselves. So the binding and entrapment was a gesture for Ireland saying either the English trap, the Irish or they allow themselves to be trapped in a certain way.

Rolfe feels very strongly about what he sees as a complacenty in the Irish attitude and how he sees them put down, and how they allow this to happen. He feels he wishes to defend a freedom or spirit for the Irish.

The actual rope farmer's twine used in the work came from a particular emigrants cottage in Leitrim, which Rolfe found to be an astonishingly moving place.

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There are also some other useful, pictorial stepping stones in the actions for example Rolfe showered in water on the video screen, a symbol for across the water.

The binding of rope alone outside the whole piece has been performed twenty-nine times over nearly five years. Rolfe had thought it would become a lifer's work ebcause it was in such great demand by audiences requesting it be done again. It was however becoming more difficult for Rolfe to perform as he was more afraid and unable to do it. At first when Rolfe put himself in the position of being unable to breath, see or smell or communicate it was obviously very frightening.

Even having mastered it and gained control of it, as time passed by it became increasingly difficult to do. He found it psychologically a very dangerous piece of work, because all he felt he had was his identity and self control.

It has also been a very effective piece of work for the audience in terms of emotion, resulting in their crying, and touching him. This image developing of a string man that is both funny and tragic at the same time, the audience can feel the spectacle. Rolfe making himself into a particular kind of freak.

After about ten minutes into the work Rolfe says he felt his audience breathe for him as they became aware of their own breathing. Towards the end of the piece Rolfe's own breathing became so forced as he strained for every grain of oxygen as he found to keep a particular cycle of breathing going which was very mannered, ritualiszed and very important for keeping control.

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He says he became increasingly conscious and found it difficult to sustain making this self-threatening art image, and if only for one moment he lost control, he would have been dead.

The audience response to the rope was obviously different in Derry to Galway which affected the way Rolfe approached them. He says he really wanted to confront Derry and

"throw it in their faces". Also because it was in the city hall, which is apparently protestant defended in a catholic city, and it was private. Rolfe found it necessary to perform naked because it was art internal space and people came because they wanted to be there, these would have been no incidental viewers.

Rolfe also felt he had to prove his seriousness to the organisers who disapproved of him performing naked. He says it was important to take the work so far, because he felt being an artist in those circumstances had he not reacted, who would?

Rolfe feels this did make a difference to the work, as when it was touring around the country, it had been very schematic performed in white overalls, because the binding of the rope was only on video, it wasn't live in context of the work and the only real point of actual performed interest the naked drawing and at that point it is a moment of retrospection, a moment where Rolfe is declaring and exposing himself.

Through the process of performance and mixed media Rolfe believes people are provoked to consider their own sociopolitical situations - firstly the political statement of performing in front of people and confronting them, which is radical, making demands on them, taking away their

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private space and demanding that they witness something. If the audience wish to engage with him and many often do, largely it is how they view themselves. As a constant current performer Rolfe says his position is that he exposes himself to the audiences prejudices, but that they actually control the situation, so if they wish to turn around or end it, they can.

"In the ultimate instance the performance is the place of permanent re-encountering for him who never visited the place, this is the suprising way in which the appointment with the rejected is carried out, more than the unknown. A re-encounter with what the average man cannot search for, given his scarce participation in the magic domain of Art".<sup>3</sup>.

Rolfe believes his success in performing is his ability to expose and hold that tension. So it is entirely up to the audience, which is just a group of people gathered together.

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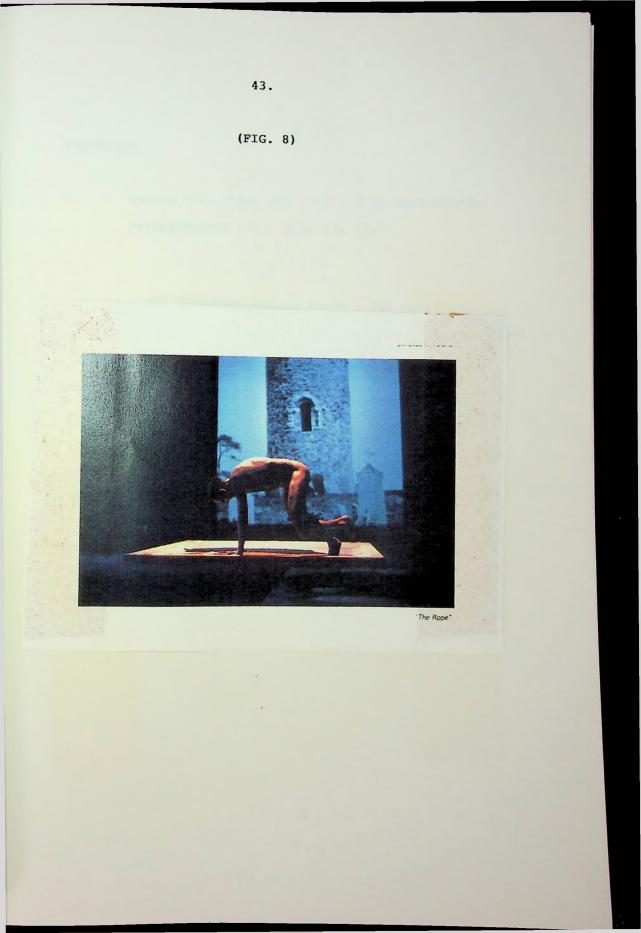
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## FOOTNOTES

- Andrea Hill, "Hot and Cold", High Performance, Spring/Summer 1982, p.p. 32, 36.
- Paddy Woodward, "Nigel Rolfe : The Naked and the Deadly Obscure", Image, October 1984 pp.120-121.
- 3. Luciano Inga Pin, Elements of Performance Art.

CHAPTER V

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THE ARTIST'S CHALLENGE

This chapter is based on Nigel Rolfe's Challenge of Art space, audience and communication. Included are a series of questions posed by Rolfe, which are discussed through questions in the audio cassette tape enclosed.

I feel this is relevant to the way Rolfe presents his own work to the public, its possibilities and limitations, dealing with the limitations of time, space, material and its effect on the audience. How Art is viewed, its presentation in the context of how and why art is made relating to its momentary, ephemeral existence.

Rolfe challenges the issues involved in viewing artwork and the response it provokes.

Rolfe challenges the parameters of how art is viewed. He sees it as a life-giving force and the question of art as something shared and something made. And the process of questioning art in real time, as opposed to formal determined work.

Rolfe demands of his audience a commitment to the activity and dialogue of art. He does not provide his audience with a frontal theatre but the next stage beyond 'theatre in the round', but 'theatre in the real'. This work is very deconstructed and attacks the audiences prejudices.

It becomes clear from the Artist's challenge Rolfe's main emphasis is on how art is seen and presented in a society where we are product orientated in the way market forces work, as opposed to the method of making art work.

Rolfe clarifies the idea of questioning publicly what art work is, this particular challenge -; to challenge the issues involved in viewing art and responding to what it is.

#### CHALLENGE

I want to Challenge : The way public space is used to present Art Work.

I would like you to consider the limits and influences on how you view the art object.

For example:

Do you think the nature of a room effects an artwork it houses? Are your judgements of an artwork's quakity altered by an experience you have just before or after you look at it? How long do you consider a piece of art for? Is your recognition of an artwork's quality largely governed by your own pre-conceptions?

I want to Challenge: How art galleries have developed and in general the context for artwork in public space.

I believe that there are many spaces more suited to the qualities of art than the cold and aggressive modern building: for instance the workspace or by the roadside. I would like to see art treated as something more than an embellishment to the built environment.

I want to Challenge : The notion of art object as individual saleable product and hence the group exhibition of many dis-similar products housed together.

I believe that an artwork's worth is related to its effect on the spectator's imagination, the ability to trigger off the process if tangental thinking. Such quality bears no relationship with exchange value.

I want to Challenge : How journalism and the media have affected the presentation of art to a wider audience.

I believe that the consideration of the quality of artwork is essentially a quiet experience. It is a one to one process of lasting depth and not involved with the temporary, superficial and second-hand values of mass-communication.

I would like to begin to consider in a deeper and wider sense what art is to you.

I would like you to do something practical with your thoughts.

Nigel Rolfe Dublin 1978.

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

With regard to performance, the space in which a performer acts is an essential component, however with the stage eliminated, platform removed and the artist performing almost always surrounded by the public, does Rolfe feel that the more the physical space deteriorates, it provokes with its absence more of an involvement with the audience?

In what ways does Rolfe challenge the formality of the art gallery situation?

How does Rolfe feel he challenges peoples inhibited views of art?

What does Rolfe expect of his audience and their participation?

What kind of role does Rolfe feel the Irish play?

How would he like to see it change?

Obviously audience response to performance art is generally more aggressive and active than that of their visual art forms, because the involvement and responses are more immediate, however the audience may also feel inhibited by the performer, and his presence, what is Rolfe's view?

Does Rolfe worry about intimidating his audience?

Does Rolfe value the understanding of the gallery audience who are more likely to appreciate and eveluate his work more fully than a potentially hostile street audience?

Does Rolfe feel by taking his art onto the street or using anti-art venues as a way of reaching a far wider audience?

## CONCLUSION

Nigel Rolfe's performances are associated with ritual, technology and with being as much as doing. It is a questioning and probing process which may make enquiries about the nature of space and the nature of time.

Rolfe's work is designed to provoke our thoughts and emotions rather than to deliver clear cut messages.

His purpose is to provide us with a series of critical questions, not to give answers to a series of pre-defined problems.

"Performance by nature and by tradition suffers from certain paradoxes and inbuilt contradictions which render it especially difficult to make as well as to look at, interpret and criticize<sup>1.</sup>

Rolfe's ideas of performance tend to by hybrid, like the art form itself they are a combination of explorations of materials, body, space, statement - in asking, duration in time and so on. His most successful performances often produced coherent images or activities arrived at through a stringent questioning of purpose meaning and the values of accepted art. Rolfe's art form is informative and challenging drawing the audience to a heightened participation through explorative, provocative means.

In communicating to his audience, the language Rolfe uses puts himself to the fore and takes the audience one step further, whether it be reasonable or acceptable to them. By doing so, he has often subjected himself to great extremes of physical and mental discomfort. Rolfe engages his audience using art as an extension of life, the audience and performer experiencing it simultaneously. It is encouraging to see that Rolfe comes up with images which can be developed or from which an image material or phrase could be lifted and carried on with.

Rolfe's work may be seen as an articulation of something that is already there; situations that would come out of and beyond painting and sculpture, free from the assumptions of how traditional art forms are used in the art world.

 Rosalee Goldberg, "Performance : The Art of Notation", High Performance.

### APPENDIX I

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following includes, questions based on interviews held with Nigel Rolfe, on Friday January 25th and on Friday February 1st 1991.

Each Section is divided by Chapter Headings :-

- I. Outline of Rolfe's background, sculpture to performance.
- II. Ground Drawings.
- III. Jungle.
- IV. The Rope that Binds Us Makes Them Free.

# I. <u>OUTLINE OF ROLFE'S BACKGROUND</u> (SCULPTURE TO PERFORMANCE)

The emergence of Rolfe's work from sculpture to performance.

What is the intention of the effect of Rolfe's performances?

How has the development of sculpture to performance affected Rolfe's work?

In what ways has performance created possibilities in bringing art into the sphere of real time and space?

How does Rolfe through performance dissolve barriers?

Why is performance suited to experimentation in ways that traditional forms such as painting are sculpture are not?

To Rolfe how is performance art more confrontational than sculpture?

Why is performance more of an articulation of life, and not a representation? When performing in what kind of way does Rolfe wish to engage his audience?

How does Rolfe as a performance artist induce his audience to take note of and assume its own inadequacies?

How can the distance between art materials and audience be reduced?

Through the means of performance art is Rolfe making a conscious effort towards breaking away from the syndrome of art as a commodity?

# RED WEDGE, BRIDGE (1978-1980)

In his earlier works such as Red Wedge and Bridge, these pieces are seen as sculpture. Primarily what interested Rolfe about them? (I.E. the spectator asked to investigate the object and share in it's creation).

Is Rolfe alluding to the constructivist Red Wedge? If so, do the political attitudes connect?

How much importance does Rolfe place whereby the person and materials meet?

Rolfe has said he does not consider this work as live performance but working ritual, what does he mean by the term working ritual?

How does Rolfe think his audience differentiate between what he calls sculpture in motion and performance?

Is it essential that these works were carried out in public?

Why was more importance placed on the bringing about of an object than the actual object itself?

Rolfe has said that "Sculpture is how the artist directs the material in a given space and all conditions of this process are of equal importance. Why, then having interacted his body with the material and space, creating a balance, finish the piece with a violent collapse?

Why does Rolfe feel that it was necessary to push his body to the limits of endurance to convey his dialectics?

Why were these earlier works deliberate attempts to shock and distance?

Does Rolfe feel these performances were in any way informative?

Does the element of violence in Rolfe's work reflect that of our culture?

What is Rolfe's understanding of temporality in Art? (Perhaps more of a rejection of the material object, and a celebration of temporal theatre like visual experiences?).

Does Rolfe see performance as a catalyst towards finding a means of expression opposing already established art establishment ideals?

### GROUND DRAWINGS

# THE BODY PHYSICALITIES COMPLETE PHYSICAL CONTACT ENDURANCES

Re-appropriation of ritual.

Dialogue between self and society.

The artist using his own body as materials for the performance - works that are in many ways reflections on the primitive.

Experience and history - the opportunity for a re-encounter - acting on signs and meanings.

Does Rolfe wish to remind us of the primitive in man?

The materials and performance dictating each other - primarily a balance, then transferral to another state, involvement with the material, how does this reflect a social struggle?

Process of change, overcoming static conditions and social conventions?

The crawling drawing, undrawing process in ground drawings could be seen as an almost absorption of pigment through the skin, complete physical contact.

How does Rolfe's attempts to affiliate himself with ritualistic tribal drawings in this way affect social conventions?

What do the 'precious' images destroyed and 'absorbed' by the naked body suggest to Rolfe?

How does Rolfe feel his audience perceive his actions?

Does Rolfe alienate his audience?

What Rolfe does Rolfe believes he plays in making ritual art?

Does Rolfe see ritual and performance as oppositions to the status quo?

## PERFORMANCE AS CEREMONY

Does Rolfe see his performances as catharsis and celebration?

How does Rolfe see the range of symbolism he uses as accessible to the public? "Life as it is and life as we mysticise it".

Lucy Lippard has said "Rituals reveal values at their deepest level. Men express in ritual what moves them most", she sees in the study of rituals a key to the understanding of the essential constitution of societies. How does Rolfe see them?

Does Rolfe believe that his role in making ritual art is a process through which he is confronting, overcoming material and social conventions?

What parallels does Rolfe draw from his earlier wooden constructions and their destruction to the prolonged rolling, crawling process in ground drawings?

What formal resemblance do these evocative images hold for Rolfe?

Has ritualistic use of symbol drawn directly on traditional often tribal religious contexts sought to provoke and identify ways of thinking contemporary life seems to obscure?

The element of ritual in Rolfe's work, could it be an attempt to reach out from a position of isolation and alienation attempting to create something which is common with the audience?

### JUNGLE

Rolfe developing one of the central concerns of this work - a ritualised structure.

Rolfe's work is described as a ritualized structure, is this because, time, space and movement are all used as repeated elements?

By emphasising the use of time in Rolfe's work process, what are the references to tribal activity?

Why did he employ the ethnically related sound-track to this piece of work?

Was it necessary to strengthen the sense of ritual?

Was one of Rolfe's main concerns in the making of Jungle to depict the cultural exploitation of tribal communities by artists for their own means?

How does Rolfe feel now about re-appropriating ritual from tribal societies to function as an art form, for his own benefit?

What effect does Rolfe think these tribal images and sounds have on our culture?

What difference would it make if Rolfe performed 'Jungle' in the society from which it came where ritual is so much a part of life?

Who benefits from Rolfe's re-appropriation of ritual?

On another level, has Rolfe ever considered the notion of ritual for example in his own society, such as street gangs and their initiation ceremonies?

How critical is Rolfe of the application of ritual in his work?

# THE ROPE THAT BINDS US MAKES THEM FREE

Confrontation of personal, moral and political issues.

What personal significance does the rope that binds us makes them free have for Rolfe?

For Rolfe as an Englishman 'Bound Up' in Irish culture. The personal has become highly political, was this a deliberate attempt on Rolfe's behalf?

In what way does Rolfe feel through the process of performance and mixed media people are evoked to consider their own socio-political situations?

To what extent should the artist compromise his work in order to communicate to his audience?

As a contrast to 'Jungle' for example, How does Rolfe see this work in terms of conveying emotions?

In what way does Rolfe feel his art could affect the way people think politically in Ireland, for example, having performed 'The Rope that Binds Us Makes Them Free' in Derry? What way did the audience respond to this work?

The audience reponse to this work was obviously different in Derry to that of Galway. For what reason(s) did Rolfe perform naked in Derry and clothed in Galway?

How necessary was it to incorporate the backdrop of screen soundtrack and live work to achieve what Rolfe wanted to say? ter bener seller.

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