

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
VIDEO, MUSIC
AND DANCE

The Kitchen: Measuring Out our Lives in Teaspoons...

Mona Sulzman

Bruce McLean with Rosy McLean
The Object of the Exercise
The Kitchen

This month the Kitchen introduces an array of foreign performers. The "Imports" series, conceived and organized by curator RoseLee Goldberg, opened two weeks ago with the work of Scottish-born and London-based Bruce McLean. Having girded myself (mainly with pep talk) for the expected, habitual battle that my eyes, concentration and back usually have with the Kitchen's pillars, set, seating design and crowds, I was overjoyed at what I saw, even before the performance began.

The audience faces west. In front of us, four pillars (the ones which square off about a third of the Kitchen's combined seating and performing area) have become appropriate and august structures that define and contain an oddly provocative set/environment. Symmetrically arranged to form an octagon within this circumscribed area stand eight white plinths. (A plinth, I learned through post-performance conversation, is a block structure that usually serves as a base or pedestal for some object or additional structure.)

All the plinths but one are the same — almost cuboid and about the height of a coffee table. Directly opposite and furthest from the audience reigns a taller, chest-high plinth. The octagon extends almost to the boundaries of the square and delineates within itself most of the performance area. The performers, Bruce McLean and Rosy McLean, can move comfortably between plinths.

The tall plinth suggests an altar, for directly over each one hangs a light, and on each one lies an object. With a white teacup and saucer glowing sacredly upon the tall plinth, the altar image arises. The eight lights are suspended low and domed by metal, silvery, inverted-bowl-shaped shades. The seven other objects are as unspectacular and domestic as the teacup: a small green alarm clock, a bathroom scale, a copy of *House and Garden*, a glass pitcher, a framed picture, a white vase and a large glass ashtray. The lighting on all the objects is the same, reminiscent of museums, showrooms, certain modern offices and homes.

Artificially displayed and isolated, the objects merely hint at life within a home environment. They radiate auras of both intimacy and sterility. By directing our esthetic focus to them (a focus we sense to be ludicrously out of place), McLean sets the scene for the intellectual content of his work — our focus upon and relationship to objects in general.

Improvisation, based on certain activities, phrases and ideas, allows the McLeans to construct and de-construct an argument. The argument is with each other, with the objects, with themselves individually, with the performance, with the argument. Bruce kicks chairs behind the squared-off area, tries to get Rosy to repeat what he thinks she's just said, does

physical exercises. Rosy wends her way among the plinths, toys with the objects and engages in simple calisthenics. All actions are linked without logical sequence and are often repeated. With his back to us and Rosy, Bruce shouts, almost desperately, "I bet you're fiddling with the fuckin' jug." Actually, Rosy's lying face down on the floor. Snippets of communication emerge and disintegrate. At times the two of them are both talking and not talking to each other.

Words projected upon two screens further illuminate the fragmentation and trappings of language and the tyrannical triviality of the objects with which we live. Transfixed or vexed by them, we allow objects to engulf us in details. And when the details absorb our attention, they interfere with perception and communication. We invest minute details with meaning in order to allow them to provide the meaning in our lives. While gliding smugly over a patina of order and sense, we fail to notice the quagmire we mistake for support.

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In England it is the teacup which structures the day and holds a monopoly on comfort and distraction. "Have a cup of tea" can imply that one's problems will be solved by that cup of tea. The words also offer a way to fill time and start conversation. Like McLean, English playwrights often treat the themes presented in *The Object of the Exercise* satirically and buoyantly. They disclose the problematic nature of language and objects from a social perspective and within a social context. They underline the hypocrisy, superficiality or political ineptitude of their society, and reveal themselves as a silly and pitiful lot.

The American approach to this subject rarely embodies social or political perspectives. Reveling in the liberation of absurdity, American works which in form resemble McLean's and which deal with the nature of language and objects usually generate mainly esthetic, rarely intellectual stimulation, even when they are funny. In France, we often witness elaborate philosophical and theoretical expositions incorporated into works — Sartrean *nausea* and attempts to exclude all subject matter other than "things" from the novel.

Pinteresque, rather than Beckettian (be that Irish or French), less flamboyantly zany than Trisha Brown's *Pamplona Stones* or Davis Gordon's *WordsWorth* (two American pieces to which I kept comparing McLean's), and without the sustained French gravity and stylistic rigor, *The Object of the Exercise* is an unmistakably British import. But cultural comparisons merely facilitate description, no evaluation, of a work. And I want to say that McLean is more than an import. His work, and his and Rosy McLean's performances, brought an unusually enriching evening to the Kitchen. ●