

Helen Sear : *Some Kind of Balance* 1982



Battersea Arts Centre – Women in Art Education Conference 1982. Photo : Stephen Scott

SOME KIND OF BALANCE.

PERFORMANCE. NOVEMBER 1982.

The set consisted of a wall of three screens with a 5' by 3'6" piece of glass in the centre screen, backed with mirrorflex.

A woman stands in front of the mirror dressed in a voluminous white tissue paper dress. she holds a duster in one hand and begins to wipe the dust from the mirror.

Unseen at first another woman dressed in a similar, black, dress begins to scrape the back off the mirror with a knife.

Shafts of light come through the mirror, gradually revealing the 2nd woman as a reflection of the 1st.

A sound tape plays simultaneously and a conversation between the two women, or rather both sides of the same, develops.

Occasionally the 1st woman turns away from the mirror into a spotlight to face the audience. she comments on her appearance, as others have described her in the past.

To counter the fantasy like set, slides of the view from the womans room fade in and out between the screens either side of the mirror. Noises from the street can also be heard as a background to the taped conversation.

The performance lasts about 20 minutes.

Some Kind Of Balance was first performed at Battersea Arts Centre during the 'Women In Art Education' conference, in November 1982, and later at the 'London Film Co-op', the Slade School Of Art, and Lanchester Polytechnic for Coventry Events Week.

N.B.

The black and white video tape accompanying this piece was made before the first performance, in an attempt to develop the piece and to interpret it differently through the use of another medium.

"SOME KIND OF BALANCE" (7)

performed by: HELEN SEAR & LESLEY ARDEN
costumes designed by: DEBBIE THOMAS

ORIGINAL TEXT.

What are you looking at?
THE FEATURES ARE FAMILLIAR.
It doesn't matter, I'm looking for expression. Any expression.
Look at the state of this place. Damp, untidy, everything covered in a layer of dust.
THOSE SMALL BLUE EYES. OR ARE THEY GREY WITH PERHAPS A HINT OF GREEN?
I can't shut out the street, it's always there. When I try to wipe away the dust it
always comes back. The next day. Through the windows, through the floorboards, through
the cracks in the wall.
Your capacity for attention seems very limited. Your home is a mess.
THAT FUNNY NOSE WITH A CHERRY ON THE END. THERE'S A DENT IN THE MIDDLE FROM THE TIP TO
THE BASE.
Homes are for families. There are a lot of families moving into this street.
Am I going to tell you something you don't already know?
PALE UNDEFINED LIPS.
Down with the old flats, up with the new. Renovated flats. Warm, clean, white and
carpeted. The dust is beginning to clear. Strange, the dust never gets into the new flats.
It's the same street.
You're thinking life isn't that bad. This is 1982. You don't have to be married.
A STRONG JAW, HER FATHER'S JAW.
If you're a single woman you have to have a child to qualify for a renovated flat. A subt
subtle pressure. Conform and stay warm.
Why don't you pull yourself together. There are other ways of living your life you know.
ONE OF HER MOTHERS EARS, ONE OF HER FATHERS.
I'm trying to, but I'm frightened up here all on my own. Nothing above me, nothing below.
Just this house falling around me. Staring at my own reflection.
Why do you go on making the same mistakes? You criticise other peoples lives. Empty lives
you say. Isolation in the home. Modern technology governing miserable families. But you
still doubt the alternatives.
THERE ARE LINES ON HER FOREHEAD, SHE'S HAD THEM SINCE SHE WAS FOURTEEN.
I'll go and buy some whisky.
No. Phone your mother up. She's always at home.
SHE USUALLY WEARS SOME MAKEUP IN PUBLIC.
One day you'll meet the right person. It would be so much safer with a man in the house.

(2)

If you really wanted that kind of security you would have found it by now. Anyway you're strong enough to be on your own.

THAT'S WHY SHE ONLY GOT ONE EAR PIERCED. TO BALANCE THE ONE THAT STICKS OUT.

It's not safe to walk these streets alone after dark, when you're a woman, but I need to walk on my own. Sometimes I feel a prisoner in this house.

Do you remember when you were too frightened to leave the house and walk to the corner shop? You'd get half way there and panic. You thought you couldn't go forwards or backwards. Rooted to the spot. You'd forgotten where you were; who you were.

IT'S RATHER A FULL FACE, NO HOLLOW CHEEKBONES.

Fear is a frightening sensation. Six months and the cracks are beginning to show. I wish someone was here with me.

You're not really afraid of all those people out there, you're afraid of yourself.

You're frightened of conformity but unsure you have the strength to rebel.

SHE USUALLY DYES HER HAIR ONCE OR TWICE A YEAR.

I just want to find some kind of balance. A way of living my life.

You just want security without commitment.

THERE'S ONE LONG HAIR THAT GROWS OUT OF HER CHIN. IT'S ALWAYS THERE. WHEN SHE TRIES TO PLUCK IT OUT IT ALWAYS COMES BACK. THE NEXT WEEK.

The builders have access to the top floor flat and the bottom. I can hear them walking on the bare floorboards above me. They must know I'm here. In the middle.

You'll be the next to go. This place is due for a face lift.

IT'S NOT AN UNATTRACTIVE FACE. NOT BEAUTIFUL.

It's very difficult to get up and walk away from the mirror. I can't really see much from the window. Only the dust on the glass. The men upstairs are moving the rubbish down. It's piling up to the left of the front door, past the boarded windows of the ground floor flat to the sill of my window.

You think you're the only one standing up here. Well you're not. Look outside.

The sounds from the street seem so close. Is that someone coming to my door?



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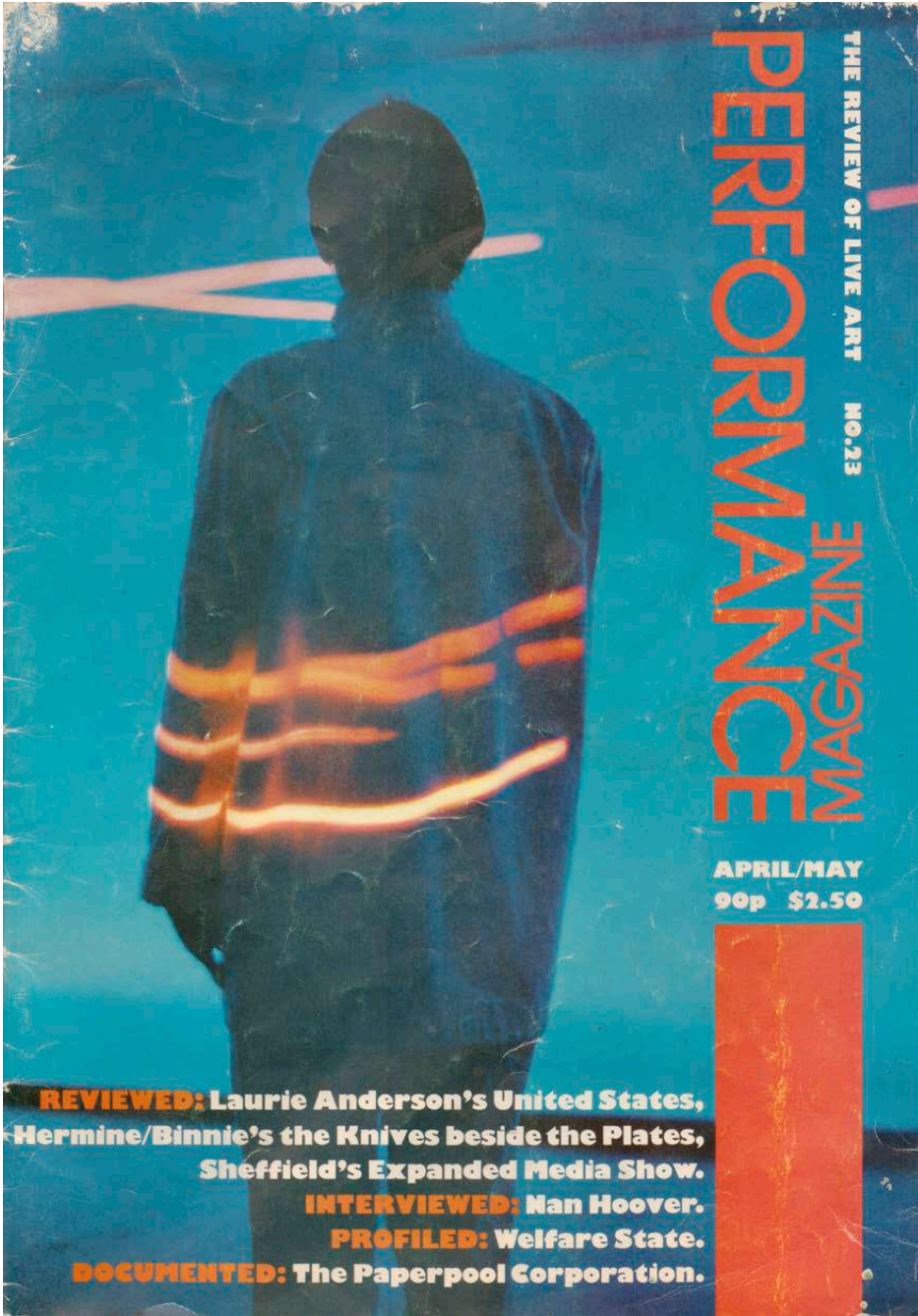
Battersea Arts Centre – Women in Art Education Conference 1982. Photo : Stephen Scott



Video Still



Video Stills



PERFORMANCE MAGAZINE

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REVIEWED: Laurie Anderson's United States, Hermine/Binnie's the Knives beside the Plates, Sheffield's Expanded Media Show.
INTERVIEWED: Nan Hoover.
PROFILED: Welfare State.
DOCUMENTED: The Paperpool Corporation.

Helen Seer/ Zoe Redman LONDON FILM CO-OP

A great white puff-ball of a skirt sits unceremoniously in front of three screens of which the central panel is distinguished by a window of silver paper. A nauseating smell of cheap talcum powder fills the air as the artist climbs into her voluminous skirt and disturbs layers of the dreaded dust scattered about the floor. The smell wafts across to the audience as Helen Seer begins to manically dust more talcum powder from the silver papered window. Her vast skirt hovers awkwardly around her, alternately suggesting a big-bellied clown, a whirling dervish and a monster fairy from the top of the Christmas tree. Slides of the view from a window onto a suburban street animate the flanking screens and a woman's prerecorded voice begins to describe a life of domestic imprisonment both actual and psychological. 'This place, damp, untidy.. I try to wipe away the dust, but it always comes back.. I'm frightened up there, nothing above, nothing below.' Another voice gently criticises '.. you're not really afraid of people outside, only yourself.. you're afraid of conformity but you doubt your strength to rebel.' While this dialogue develops against the sounds of a busy street, the silver paper is being energetically scraped away by another woman on the other side of the window. She too is weighed down by an enormous skirt — but hers is black. Seer occasionally breaks off her manic dusting to deliver short descriptions of the 'she' in question: 'Her small blue eyes or are they grey with perhaps a hint of green.. a strong jaw, her father's jaw.. she has lines on her forehead, she's had them since she was 14.'

Poor housing, agoraphobia, paranoia, conflicts of conformity vs. nonconformity, the limitations of women's choices, the obsession with their bodies, all these become elements in a rather bleak description of a young woman delivered by the dead-pan voices of Helen Seer live and on tape. Against this, the reality of the artist's imagination, her fantastic skirts, the simple and effective structure of the performance itself suggest another side to the 'she' which I took to be in part autobiographical. I began to want some of that positive imagery to complicate the text, an element of optimism to offset what was beginning to sound like a hopeless case. Besides this, I thought 'Some kind of Balance' was an excellent performance.