JOHN GILLIES AND THE SYDNEY FRONT

TECHNO/DUMB/SHOW

A COLLABORATIVE WORK BETWEEN
JOHN GILLIES AND THE SYDNEY FRONT

For John Gillies and The Sydney Front the performance work which formed the basis of *Techno/Dumb/Show* was a central part of the conceptualisation of this piece; the video is not a documentary of a performance but a separate work, a collaboration which was a completely different way of working both for Gillies and The Sydney Front. At the outset it was decided that to simply document performances which are typically confrontational, sometimes shocking, and often aggressive to an audience, would be to destroy its real substance. The challenge was to create a form on video which could relay the gestural essence of performing, and provide the viewer with a sense of the disorganisation that often accompanies a performance in the theatre.

The script for *Techno/Dumb/Show* was worked out over a long period of time; Gillies shot footage every week over a three month period, collecting material and experimenting with it, as well as discussing possibilities and problems with the group. In the end, twenty hours of footage was edited down to a final twenty minutes. During this period Gillies saw himself primarily as an organiser rather than director, improvising in the studio with the performers, and the final piece can perhaps best be seen as a cataloguing of gestures rather than a narrative work in any conventional sense.

Video was the perfect medium to use for this project both because of its economy and the fact that each take can be instantly played back on monitors, so that the actors can direct themselves. So, for example, one might start with an improvisation, catalogue it on tape, and then begin to work with the results, keeping whatever turns out to be interesting and useful, using accidents and 'mistakes', and incorporating the highly self-conscious nature of the whole procedure. The result is an extraordinary intensification of theatrical gesture which is overloaded with a variety of technical effects, and made even more excessive by means of a strident sound track, that also serves as an editing device for each sequence of gestures.

There is an evident interest in silent film in many of the formal devices used in *Techno/Dumb/Show*, such as an emphasis on gesture and image, and a desire to foreground the nature and pleasure of theatrical gesture itself. *Techno/Dumb/Show* is an ambitious and visually sumptuous attempt to elaborate an aesthetic which captures the essence, even the physiology, of staged action.

Many of the tropes which have been employed to capture the spirit of excess which animates *Techno/Dumb/Show* can be found in classic Melodrama; John Bayliss of The Sydney Front writes:

> Melodrama is despised in our century for its overt theatricality, its heightened emotionalism. It does not conform to the dictates of naturalism ... Melodrama draws attention to its own histrionic display. It presents a public language of the emotions. The interest is not in psychological subtleties, but in the permutations within a finite array of possible meaning.[1]

In Gillies' previous works, such as *Hymn*, one can pinpoint similar interests. Here a very short sequence of movement of three bodies has been sampled from a Hollywood movie, and put on a loop to extend and repeat it. The effect is to transform their gestures from one of supplication (the original narrative function), into something new which has been intensified and reduced to the point where it resembles a physiological reaction such as breathing.

Techno/Dumb/Show is a visually elaborate and extraordinarily sensual piece of work which focuses on the formal aspects of performance in a way which rescinds narrative. Yet in a paradoxical way, it is in this act of cancellation that questions about the conditions for, and functions of narrative, can be asked anew; and it is to the bodies of the performers to which we are referred for possible answers. John Bayliss writes:

Ultimately the work is about excess, about a gesturing that goes far beyond that necessary for any 'reasonable' discourse. It is an excess of utter waste, but expending only the performers' bodies. And it has no other designs on the spectator than the generation of pleasure — a pleasure provoked by vertigo and sheer surprise at the generosity of the act, though paid for by negotiating the bitter asides that are also a part of the display.[2]

PAM HANSFORD

1. John Bayliss, *Waltz*, notes from The Sydney Front
2. John Bayliss, *The Sydney Front Perspecta Programme Notes*