Working with extended duration

Our experience of performing *How to save your skin when disaster strikes without warning* in Liverpool was useful in preparing for *MacGyver'thon* (on a practical level) as it informed our decisions about how to deal with this type of duration. We made the decision to only leave the space to go to the toilet (which was adjacent to the gallery space), or momentarily to smoke cigarettes (which was done while continuing to watch the TV programme through the gallery window), which avoided the issues that arose with *HTSYSWDSWW* where breaks turned into an unwanted punctuation in the piece.

This meant that there was an increased sense of inescapability about the space/time of the performance – it existed in its own 'world', where we had to be self-sufficient in terms of food, activities in the space etc – again calling back to these ideas about 'wholeness', endurance and, of course, preparedness.

Again, the duration of this performance was defined by the length of time it would take to watch the entire series of episodes (the 'text' for this piece) back-to-back – we would be doing this task (of watching and cataloguing) for 'as long as it takes'. Unlike, *HTSYSWDSWW* we began this task behind closed doors at 6am (partly for practical reasons – the arts centre does not open to the public until 10am). This situation of starting the performance with no audience was useful for us, as it allowed us time to get into our stride, to become comfortable with the setup and work out any last details of how we would deal with the collecting, cataloguing and reporting (re-iterating) the information (the countless ways to fool the guards, roll under doors and save the day). We began to be joined by public and invigilators by about 9am.

The main activity of the performance is a mix of both (or one or other of the) performers carefully watching 'the action' (the TV programme) on a large screen, writing notes on small hand-held whiteboards. When a number of these actions/solutions/macgyverisms have been collected, one performer will take the microphone to address the other and report (recount out-loud, with reference to the notes) what MacGyver has done to solve a particular problem or escape a particular situation. The second performer will write these 'instructions' (fragmentary texts) onto one of the large, gridded whiteboards in the space. Also, a tally is kept of women MacGyver has kissed (a reoccurring theme throughout the series) and at any point, when one of MacGyver's character traits or backstory is made explicit (mentioned in the dialogue, or in the regular narrated voice-overs) it is reported over the microphone and noted on one of the installed whiteboards:

Rachel, MacGyver has been behind the Iron Curtain

For practical reasons (lack of space!), once the large whiteboards are filled with information, they are photographed by the performers and wiped clean – we are invested in collecting this information, but the collection always temporary (this 'textbook' we are producing not being fixed?).

During the performance, we developed ways of presenting our task to the people who had come along to watch – rephrasing/reframing our telling of 'what was going on' to the audience. Although visitors were greeted with smiles or other subtle gestures, we were predominantly engaged with the task of careful watching and reporting, which leaves little time/space to speak casually. Between episodes, we took the opportunity to address the audience:

> *We've been here since 6am, Rachel's just going to change the disc. We're now on episode 5 out of 22 and we'll be here until about midnight tonight. MacGyver's doing well – in 5 episodes he has kissed 3 different women, no men yet – but fingers crossed that he'll improve on his average in the next episode.*

This kind of low-level scripting was useful as a way of positioning our activity as something slightly out of the ordinary.

Although our actual actions/task as very similar to *HTSYSWDSWW* (reading/listening, processing the information, testing, recalling), - the space the audience encountered for *MacGyver'thon* was a little different to that of *HTSYSWDSWW*. Both of us (LP) are more unambiguously involved in a process of 'watching' (a version of 'reading'). This leads to people watching us, but also spending a lot of time watching the programme – a different type of engagement, that is probably easier/more comfortable/more fun to stay for longer (watching the TV programme is also quite addictive). In preparation for (and in recognition of) this we providing snacks/popcorn to share with our audience - to 'make more' of this idea of camaraderie and 'we're in this together-ness' – and designed the space to allow for a more casual sitting/lounging around (with cushions and floor mats).

The roles taken by both performers are also more interchangeable – slipping in and out of being 'watcher' / 'reporter' / 'scribe' – and there is also more space for the audience to assist us casually with our task (sometimes we had to ask others to clarify what had just happened to make the notes clearer).

Although the reporting of most information began with a kind of verbal punctuation like "Ok" (eg "Ok, to stop a nuclear explosion – fire a bullet into a gas radiation pipe and use wrench to unscrew nut to release the pressure"), we were keen to keep the personal system of address from *HTSYSWDSWW* – beginning other collected statements with each other's first names (eg "Hannah, MacGyver knows how pickpockets do it"). I think that this kind of re-iterating (or making even more explicit) of what we are seeing/being told in the programme reinforces that the performance is about "us" finding this stuff out and telling eachother – and of course the audience is there to watch this (as well as the TV show!!).

As in *HTSYSWDSWW*, we decided to keep the microphones as they provide a useful way of 'quietly'/subtly identifying this as a performance, rather than just us watching TV. This idea of 'markers of performance' is starting to become quite important (cross ref: scale of emergency), especially when using quite an everyday activity as the basis/format for the piece.

Also, the cushions (as a marker of performance space – but one that is shared and available to both performer and audience member), specifically (hand)made for the installation/performance space are working with our concerns/ideas about care and attention we take for the audience. We discussed a number of ideas about making the space comfortable – considering having couches – deciding instead on crash mats and cushions – a bit more like school, less like a stage (the couch was in danger of becoming the space 'of the performers' only?).

Having an invigilator: a constant audience

On this occasion, we made it clear that we would need invigilators to 'be with' the work in the space during the performance. This was partly led by concerns about safety and practicality – Plymouth Arts Centre is an open access space, where anyone can wander in from the street, with more possibilities for the performance to be disrupted that at The Royal Standard. We were also aware that visitors may need/request some kind of interpretation/explanation of the piece, so were careful to meet with, and brief, front-of-house staff and invigilators prior to the event to discuss how it could be framed up.

An unexpected outcome of having an invigilator was that (of course) we were no longer ever without an audience of sorts. This was something that we would both consider in future, as it is quite useful in terms of always 'having someone there', which is quite useful in terms of sustaining the morale of performers over such a long period.

Retaining a 'task-oriented' approach

In a similar way to *HTSYSWDSWW*, *MacGyver'thon* makes use of a conceptual task that focuses the audience's attention on our on-going investigation into preparedness - in this case, using the episodes of MacGyver as a source 'text'.

We are engaged in a painstaking process of re-activating/reading the text by collecting/cataloguing/identifying how the character deals with situations/scenarios, collecting/cataloguing/identifying information we are given about his character traits and reporting (out loud) these details to create a type of 'rulebook' or 'textbook' on the whiteboards. Again, we are drawn to (and attending to) specific idiosyncrasies and counter-intuitive details – this mix of the mundane and the absurd, of plausibility and disbelief – dealing with this (relatively) spectacular source material in a way that heroic activity is made 'matter-of-fact'.

As with *HTSYSWDSWW*, there are moments of a kind of 'time-shift' - audiences see (and watch us watch) the events take place on the screen, then a little while later, hear these events re-described (communicated across the space between us (LP)) and written onto the board. Like the questions that are posted on the walls of the space during *HTSYSWDSWW*, the whiteboards give a sense of accumulation - especially the 'macgyer is…' boards that are never wiped out during the performance.

Again, our try-outs for this performance were minimal – consisting of us watching one episode together to see how the structure of the programme works, what type of information we'd be looking for and identifying the 'macgyver is' stuff as useful/interesting. More time was spent on working out the interface we would use for collecting/displaying the information – coming to the decision that whiteboards would be the most suitable (reflecting our continued interest in an administrative aesthetic, in the 'temporary' nature of this collection of information). The one compromise we had to make was in how we documented these whiteboards (by photographing) during the performance – we were searching for a better (more self-contained) way of capturing/'saving' these snapshots of information – a series of whiteboards that, with one touch, printed what was written on it would have been ideal!

During the performance, we found ways of standardising the format in which the phrases were written (eg "'To escape the bad guys – thrown a handful of sand into the bag guy's face and run) and were also keen to leave space to allow for idiosyncratic elements that developed over time – using the whiteboards facilitated this (eg the 'women macgyver has kissed' tally).

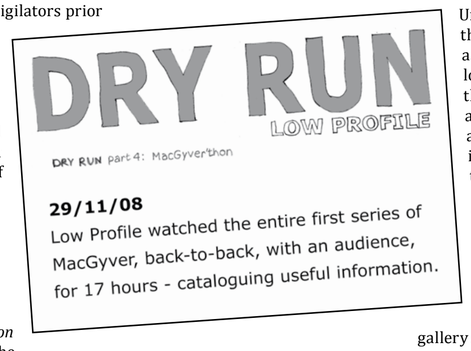
Very little manipulation of source material prior to performance

Again, this notion of 'availability' of the source text (the fact that anyone could buy the DVD box set in a shop) remains attractive to us and our 'attending to' it allows us to 're-claim' this slightly out-moded cultural product. Aesthetically, the source text is quite different to that used in *HTSYSWDSWW* - MacGyver is full of heroics (unlike The Book of Survival which claimed to only contain "Tight packed, factual information. No cheap thrills. No heroes. No heroics.") - and in this case, we are engaged in bringing the spectacular back to the status of information.

Like *HTSYSWDSWW*, *MacGyver'thon* sets up a dry run – once more giving over space and time to consider how all of these scenarios, actions, responses and possibilities might relate to each of our own situations - suggesting ways of navigating the 'emergencies' we are faced with on a daily basis. (cross ref: scale of emergency).

The tone of the TV programme - with its last minute fixes, dramatic tension and the knowledge in the mind of the viewer that MacGyver will succeed (one way or another) – has many similarities with that of the book in *HTSYSWDSWW*. Although Macgyver is put forward as an (unlikely) expert, it is his ability to respond to situations - to know the right thing to do at the right moment, and a willingness to do it - and the focus on flawed but functional (a provisional, make-shift, making do) solutions that is held in high regard.

The performance created an installation trace that is indexical of the performance itself



Unlike the original performance of *HTSYSWDSWW*, this piece was made with the intention of also acting as a gallery installation for an exhibition that lasted longer than the period of the performance itself. On the opening of the show, the space was set up, ready and waiting for the performance to begin the morning after. After the performance, the remaining traces/installation were retained/left in the space as part of the exhibition.

This meant that we had to consider more of the elements of the installation of the work in advance, which proved to be a useful discipline to adopt when working out the set-up of the live work – thinking about each of the 'functional' elements used in the performance and their status as objects in the gallery space.

With both of these outcomes in mind (the live and the 'trace' presence of the work), we made a set of hand-made cushions (embellished with visual motifs from the TV series – matches, gaffa tape, penknives, paperclips, chewing gum wrappers) and a split-screen video (showing lightly edited episodes of the TV series – 4 simultaneous episodes, no sound). The bookwork that accompanied the performance (containing the instruction piece) was also available in the space for visitors to look at/read/take away.

When considering the different mode of attention adopted by visitors to the exhibition (rather than the live work), we needed to present the work in a way that allowed it to be gazed at - getting people to just look at the 'stuff' we'd been working with – no soundtrack, no activation of the material. We hoped that this situation would engender an imagining of the space/time of the performance itself, rather than purely re-present it. For this reason, it was important to produce a condensed text to be installed in the space:

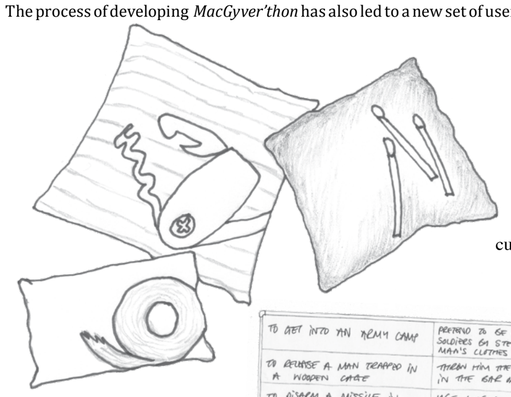
> DRY RUN: LOW PROFILE
> DRY RUN part 4: MacGyver'thon
> 29/11/08
> Low Profile watched the entire series of MacGyver, back-to-back, with an audience, for 17 hours – cataloguing useful information.

This was initially going to be installed in the space - vinyl text on the wall, or on the plinth under the projection screen – but was instead used on the cover of some new bookworks that were produced from a compilation of the photographed whiteboards (detailing Macgyver's responses to situation). On reflection, it may have been more useful/successful to have this text displayed more overtly.

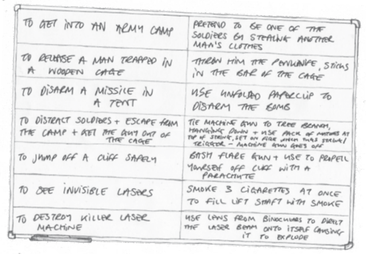
The live and exhibition versions of this piece were shown in a space alongside a static installation version of *Scale of Emergency*. The relationship between the two pieces (in this case) was more conscious than at The Royal Standard, where *Scale of Emergency* and *HTSYSWDSWW* were presented in the same space. We are interested in the possibilities this juxtaposition of pieces presents for reading the work less as a set of self-contained tasks, and more as a set of re-occurring themes we are exploring in a series of interlinked works.

New possibilities and leftovers

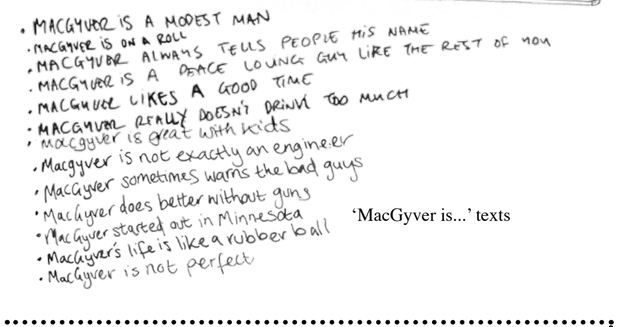
The process of developing *MacGyver'thon* has also led to a new set of useful 'leftovers':



cushions



whiteboard 'useful information' texts



'MacGyver is…' texts

DRY RUN part 4: MacGyver'thon

This was first performed at Plymouth Arts Centre (a publicly funded art gallery in Plymouth) as part of the group exhibition *Proximity Effect* in one of the ground floor gallery spaces. The performance of *DRY RUN part 4: MacGyver'thon* took place on the first day of the exhibition and the resulting performance traces (and a specially produced silent split-screen video simultaneously showing four episodes of MacGyver) were left in the gallery as an installation for the remainder of the exhibition.

Building on *DRY RUN part 2: How to save your skin when disaster strikes without warning (HTSYSWDSWW)*, the performance of *DRY RUN part 4: MacGyver'thon* uses:

- **Working with extended duration** (17 hours)
- **Having an invigitator**
- **Retaining a 'task-oriented' approach**
- **very little manipulation of source material prior to performance** (cataloguing/processing/generating text during performance rather than before)
- **the performance created an installation trace** (text on walls) **that is indexical of the performance itself**

I feel that there are many similarities in the practical approach and conceptual concerns addressed by *DRY RUN part 4: MacGyver'thon* and *HTSYSWDSWW* – this text will make a number of comparisons between the two performances.