# Liveness, Performance and the Permanent Frame Mike Leggett

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### **Abstract**

As Eve Kalyva has noted:

...is there a difference, and if so what is the difference, between viewing a performance and viewing its recording? Surely there is the factor of threat and keeping it under check, for presumably one can interfere with a performance; or to put it another way, the whole point of a performance is this conditional interaction. (2009)

Conditional interaction contests the state of the physical distance between the place of the audience and the place of the performer. The invisible fourth wall in traditions of live performance or cinema is the membrane through which the product is delivered, regardless of the state, or frame of mind, of the audience; the agency of each member of an audience in these circumstances is restricted only to removing oneself from the auditorium.

In the *Unword* series of performances, devised and produced by Ian Breakwell in 1969 and 1970, the rules met audience expectations for events and sounds that departed from traditions of narrative, whilst maintaining them not as participants but as spectators (of a spectacle). The performances included the 'on-stage' presence of the Photographer, (the author of this paper), who with a film camera recorded moments from the entirety of each event; the filmmaker was an integral part the performance, the film record being projected during and as part of subsequent performances.

During 2003 the film was digitised as a DVD complete with the recorded sound played into the performance spaces. With the liveness and the presence of the performer(s) removed, the digital reconstruction as a projection event changes the conditions of interaction and the terms of individual agency afforded the audience: the screened image can be

approached and appropriated into the physical space of the viewer. The modality of encounter thus switches from one tradition to another, from that of theatre and cinema, where agency is limited, to that of the gallery, where agency in the physical act of viewing is essential.

This paper discusses film, video and photographic records of three performance events from the 1970s, of the gestural and ephemeral, choreographed into specific performance venues, but emerging today as objects of permanence in the form of DVDs and website archives. Are context, place and presence central to the experience, and what Cologni calls 'fruition', in recorded works? What part does contemporary discourse play, when works are retrieved, replayed, relived?

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#### Introduction

(SLIDE 1) This paper discusses film, video and photographic records of three performance events from the 1970s, of the gestural and ephemeral, choreographed into specific performance venues, but emerging today as objects of permanence in the form of DVDs and website archives. Are context, place and presence essential to the experience, and what Cologni calls 'fruition', in recorded works? What part does contemporary discourse play, when works are retrieved, replayed, relived?

Do the contemporary technologies of digital video in all its forms, including the Web and mobile devices, by appealing to spontaneity and informality, actually encourage and provoke the reframing of an original performance into a new presence, thereby evoking the certainties of ritual and redefining context within the moment of performance?

(SLIDE 2) In this brief introduction to the topic I will refer to my collaborative work with artist Ian Breakwell on the *Unword*, *Unsculpt* and *One* performance projects in England during the early 1970s, the use of moving picture technologies in their execution, and the re-presentation of these works in both analogue and digital media, including the contemporary format of the Digital Versatile Disc (DVD). In the role of both performer and witness to the events documented I will address the words of the contemporary art historian, Eve

## Kalyva:

'I want to note how documentation affects understanding the historical condition of art. By relocating photographs, texts, and performances in space and time, documentation reconfigures meaning as much as matter.' (Kalyva 2009)

## Unword

(SL3) The *Unword* series of performances, occurred at the Compendium bookshop in Campden, London; the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London; Swansea University, Wales; and the Bristol Arts Centre in the West of England. The performances met audience expectations for events and sounds that departed from traditions of narrative, maintaining the audience as spectators (of a spectacle). The performances included the 'on-stage' presence of the Photographer, (the author of this paper), who with a 16mm film camera recorded moments from the entirety of each event. (Appendix A Description of the Unword 2 performance at the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) on 17 October 1969 (Ian Breakwell, c. 1969).

(SL 4)

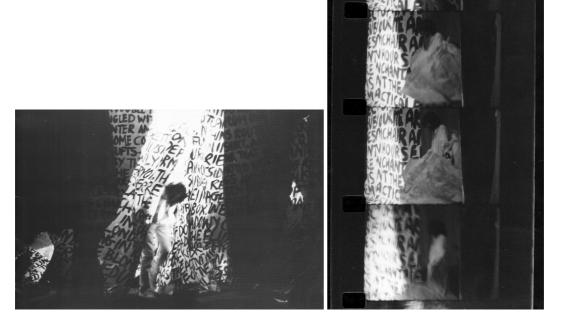


Fig 1: left, Unword 1; right, Unword 2, 16mm filmstrip.

(SL 5) The Photographer, as performer, thus generated a link as

documenter between each of the performances, with both the act of recording and the re-presentation of the record using a film projector,<sup>1</sup> included in each subsequent version of the event.





Fig 2: left, the *Unword 4* Swansea performance, Breakwell (centre) and Leggett; right, the *Unword 3* Bristol performance, Leggett (centre) and Breakwell; with the projector and image to the right of stage.<sup>2</sup>

(SL 6) Later, after the series had come to an end, the footage was edited to 'recreate' a filmic version of events that had occurred throughout the series to an approximate equivalent duration. The editing strategy was to follow documentary filmmaking convention and maintain a sense of continuity between one series of frames captured at one performance and another group of frames from another performance (Breakwell and Leggett 1969-70). 'The governing dictum whilst combining the three films into one was to remove all points of reference and discontinuity between the three films' (Worsley 2005). By incorporating different features from the performances the intention was to relate a narrative approximating to the events experienced by the audiences.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The projector employed was an analysis projector capable of running at 2, 4, 8 and 16 frames per second. Set for 2 fps, the effect was similar to a fast slide show of images projected quite small and to one side of the performance area.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Also visible are the other performers: to the left, the performer contained in the plastic greenhouse; at the back, the woman around who the sheets are wrapped. Also on the back wall, part of the image of the Sheepman, one of the 16mm found prints – see more in Appendix A).

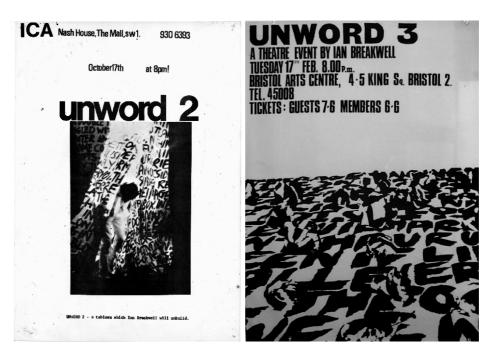


Fig 3: *Unword* publicity – left, A4 flyer; right, silk-screened poster by Gerald Buchanan (80 cm x 50 cm), Mike Leggett Collection.

In 2003 the footage was telecine-transferred to digital video and the process of restoring the original commenced using a non-linear editing software application. Following capture from the tape to the computer hard disc the footage was initially 'stretched' on the editing timeline to slow movement down from twenty-five frames per second to the two frames per second of the film original. The digitised quarter-inch sound tape was imported to the editing application and added to the picture track. A few adjustments were made to the sound track and to shots that were too bright or too dark, before the whole project was exported back to digital videotape. The digital version of *Unword* was made from this for presentation *specifically* as a large-screen installation, (Breakwell and Leggett 2003) in an edition of two plus two artists' proofs, represented by Breakwell's gallerist, Anthony Reynolds Gallery. (SL 7 – 1-min movie extract)

## **Discussion**

Understanding the 'historical condition' (Kalyva 2009) through documentation and the replaying of documents for contemporary audiences, will now be discussed. (SL 8)

The digital version of *Unword*, at this point in time (2010), can be screened

at dimensions scalable according to the need, from centimetres to several metres. The question can now be asked, as Kalyva has noted:

... is there a difference, and if so what is the difference, between viewing a performance and viewing its recording? Surely there is the factor of threat and keeping it under check, for presumably ... one can interfere with a performance; or to put it another way, the whole point of a performance is this conditional interaction. (Kalyva 2009)

Conditional interaction refers to the physical space between the audience and the performance. The invisible fourth wall in theatre or cinema is the membrane through which the product(ion) is delivered, regardless of the state, or frame of mind, of the audience. The agency of each member of an audience is restricted – by custom – to removing oneself from the auditorium. The conditions for delivering performance-based art in the broadest cultural sense are similar to the conditions prevalent for other forms of consumption in the late-capitalist context: producers meet consumers' demands and expectations but on condition the consumer adopts the artist's *règle du jeu*. The arrangement is symbiotic, as by tradition it prevents confusion between the object and the context in which exchange takes place.

In the *Unword* series, whilst a framing distance would be maintained by the physical delineation of the space, the rules met the demand for events and sounds that departed from traditions of narrative; in other words, the audience would remain on the other side of the invisible membrane as spectators (of a spectacle) and not participants. ('Participatory theatre' was in vogue at this time amongst thespians and desperately avoided by visual and other artists seeking not character dynamics but developing a performance practice of liveness). The film, (and later digital documentation), as artworks in their own right, similarly maintain the distancing frame as a visible membrane through the presence of the screen. The conditions for response, reflexive rather than interactive, are reversed; with the liveness and the presence of the performer(s) removed, the condition of interaction changes the terms of individual agency. The screened image can now be approached and

appropriated into the physical space of the viewer.<sup>3</sup> The modality of encounter switches from one tradition to another, from that of theatre and cinema, where agency is limited, to that of the gallery, where agency in the physical act of viewing is essential. 'This act exposes the limits of social constructs such as subject and object, galleries and spectators, not at the level of the *effect*, but of the mechanisms that create, enable, and sustain such constructs' (Kalyva 2009).

Like the formality of the event itself, the subsequent editing of the three film records maintained the separation between the activity of performing and the activity of viewing the performance. The presence of an audience at each event is never visible on film, but neither too is that of the Photographer, the one performer who was visible to the audience for the entire duration of the piece. The images and sounds encountered in the *Unword* digital document are related to each of the performances but they are not *of* the performances. Some associations can be drawn here with speech acts and the performative and 'Bakhtin's notion of dialogue ... where the conditions of communication and the choices of speakers depend on what has already been said, the conditions of the conversation (situation, purpose, etc.) and the framework within which the speaker thinks he or she will be understood' (Kalyva 2009 in press) This echoes some of Wittgenstein's 'language games' where 'the utterance cannot be separated from the speaker, or from the systems of meaning in which speaker and hearer are enmeshed' (Dourish 2001) <sup>4</sup>

The audience entering the performance space anticipated an experience based not only on transgression of the norms of theatre but also on the novelty of someone known to be a visual artist working in a theatrical context. Similarly, visitors to a sculpture collection at the Henry Moore Institute<sup>5</sup> do not expect to encounter the two-dimensional projected image of *Unword*, in a space reserved for three-dimensional objects. But nonetheless what is quickly understood is the relationship between the spatiality of their act of viewing –

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> This is dependent on varying degrees of authorised access for such physical interaction. The more extreme form of agency, that of ownership, condones the legal if not the moral right to destroy the artwork.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The image of Breakwell enmeshed and wrestling with the word-sheets used in the event make this description particularly apposite.

<sup>5</sup> HMI is situated at the Leed's Museum and Gallery, North Yorkshire, UK.

audience to performer(s), screen to viewer - and the hybrid spatiality of the images and sounds they observe. This 'social act of communication as participation and selection' (Dourish 2001) and the performative occurs through both the advance of motion picture technologies – in this case, digital video and the video projector – and the willingness of the artists, Breakwell and Leggett, to experiment with the possibilities thereby afforded.

Other social acts extend the context for the reception of the recorded work; the exhibiting institution both facilitates and validates the artwork, now independent of the original *Unword* series becoming, as portable and reproducible media, an object of economic value as well as study. The artist's dealer is able to exploit the artwork as an object of monetary worth, essential to the economics of collecting, the trading of rare objects and the vagaries of connoisseurship from which the benefits of income to the artists cannot be denied. As a privately collected item however, or any mediated artwork presented on television for instance, qualities of presence and liveness are subject to the proximity and effect of the personal, the domestic, the familiar.

The distinct separation between performers and audience in *Unword*, with the audience seated or corralled at one end of the space, provided a 'closed studio' situation within which the Photographer could record the progress of each performance with the film camera. (SL 9) The concurrence of the process of both recording and re-presenting the events was echoed in three other performances in which we collaborated during 1970, *The Institution*, *One* and *Unsculpt* in which a single closed-circuit video camera relaying a live real-time image to a monitor was employed in a more direct and tangible effect. (Leggett 2009) Video in 1970 it must be remembered, was the new media technology of the period, having only just become available in non-broadcast television formats. Epitomised by the Sony Portpak, it was for the most part, heavy to carry and hold, the image being black and white, and very fuzzy (and associated with the flared fashions of the time).

## **Unsculpt**

(SL 10) As with *Unword*, planning and communication with performers and the tempo and cueing of the stages of entries and exits, was essential.

*Unsculpt* was a collaboration between Breakwell and John Hilliard, a practicing sculptor to that point in time (Hilliard 1970).<sup>6</sup> The performance initially relied on establishing the audience in the familiar space, for most of them, of an art gallery vernissage – 'an opening'. In the speech that began the proceedings Hilliard used a microphone and public address system, his image appearing on a video monitor to his left side.



Fig 4: Video is recorded at the *Unsculpt* opening, London New Arts Lab, ground floor gallery / performance space; wordsheets, sculptures, prints on the walls and the audience caught in the frame of the monitor out of sight to the left, which the cameraman uses too, as the camera has no viewfinder.

The image and the events that followed were recorded to 16mm film but more significantly videotape, adding to the experience of the audience a novel and quite different way of *becoming* a part of the artwork through the new media of the day. The significance of the video monitor at the event is difficult for a contemporary audience to register; the ubiquity of screens today and the means with which to place images on them was entirely novel at the time of

<sup>6</sup> Hilliard was a recent graduate from St Martin's College of Art, also the institution from which Ray Barrie had graduated. Prior to the performance of Unword at the ICA in 1969, Barrie had assembled then destroyed three of his wood and steel constructions, bagged the pieces and removed them from the site. In 2010 Barrie rebuilt the three pieces and according to the exhibiting institution in Los Angeles, named the original event at the ICA, Unsculpt. http://lascienegasprojects.wordpress.com/2009/12/02/ray-barrie-david-lamelas-betsy-seder/#comment-125

the performance. (SL 11) As the video camera panned around the room, images of both the performers and audience members were caught linked together within the unifying frame. The familiar membrane between televisual subject and audience dissolves as the camera relays images throughout the ensuing evening. This realization has emerged in a way similar to the conclusions drawn by Cologni more recently in which she uses the term fruition to "..signify the verb of perceiving and becoming part of the work – labour finally coming to fruition;" (Cologni 2010) 89. It is related to Merleau-Ponty's concept of *chiasm* or *intertwining* "..embedded by adopting various strategies to stimulate a continuous communication and position shift between artist and audience in the creative process, presentation and reception" (Cologni 2010) 84.



Fig 5: Breakwell shrouds the sculpture with *Unsculpt* word sheets; the microphone and a corner of the video monitor are just visible on the right, behind a head and shoulder.

Covering the sculpture with the *Unsculpt* word sheets (Fig 5) ceased at the point the first sledgehammer began to demolish the covered objects. But within minutes the physical effort of smashing wood and steel were taking a toll on the performers and individuals in the crowd from both genders began to provide them with respite (Fig 6). This was encouraged by several factors emerging as events progressed: the close proximity of performers and

audience, due to the absence of a clear 'stage' area; the images on the video monitor of the two designated groupings; and even the coldness of the winter night in an unheated building that encouraged people to keep moving about and in some cases, physically participate. (SL 12 – movie extract)



Fig 6: *Unsculpt*, the destruction in full swing, the author in foreground with 16mm Bolex film camera.

Participation with and reflection upon the evening's activities by the viewers of the video, as part of an over-arching notion of performance, moved back and forth between the edges and centre(s) of the stage. Now events were moving toward the new work, establishing a fresh set of relationships between components and the site in which they were located. The proposition emerging was that art-making was moving away from the perfection of form of three-dimensional objects towards provisional and ephemeral visual concepts that foregrounded the presence of the individual within a place and encouraged physical interaction of the audience with(in) the artwork.



Fig 7: *Unsculpt,* the audience examining the video recording at the completion of the performance, lan Breakwell in the foreground; from 16mm film frame.

As Hilliard had determined at the planning stages in defining what the New Works were to be:

The 'object' is a kind a matrix, an intermediate stage between my 'performance' in the gallery and the resultant 'performance' of the spectators ... a formalised expression of my response to the environment resolved as participatory structures (Hilliard 1970).

(SL 13) The events that Breakwell had planned had brought an altogether different expression of how the object was to be regarded. The placing of the audience was anticipated not only in the physical arrangement of spaces for the evening and the events that were to occur but also through the organisation of image-makers, filmmaker and photographers, for the subsequent re-enactment through technology, of the transgressing *Unsculpt* events, a realisation that images and speech can be placed into contexts productive for the making of knowledge.

Understanding speech as an act can help us understand the *conditions* of the social creation of meaning and the *assumptions* we make in the process. Confronted with a polarised moral judgement of art between truth and entertainment, the work may risk its own presence. (Kalyva 2009)

The risk for Breakwell was worth taking. Groups of art students from this point on would see the images as part of Breakwell's program and practice of changing attitudes through the application of humour, irony and mockery of visual art institutions intent upon establishing good taste and orders of natural progression. Kalyva succinctly concludes:

By manipulating the authority of institutional discourse, and by inverting the temporal relation between presence and absence, acceptance and censorship, the act of eating one's words and disappearing one's work suspends the subject forever: the subject of the artist, and of the viewing subject of the spectator and of art (Kalyva 2009).

The videotape made on the night was recycled soon after the event; it was an expensive item at the time. The extant *Unsculpt* material was transferred in 2004 to digital video. The location of the audience in the two versions of *Unsculpt* – the live performance and the digital video projection – further advance the notion of individual agency as an important component of meaning being made from the experience of either form. (SL 14) Furthermore, in the digital video format it becomes possible for an interactive format to be designed, thus introducing further levels of performance participation by the contemporary audience, (including the provision of the unedited source material for continuing archival research). In the introductory menu to the DVD-ROM (Fig 8) several options are offered: to see and hear an eightminute compilation, bringing together film, photographs and sound in 16:9 aspect (2004), with the additional option of being able to 'skip' through to each of the sections (chapters) of the event; to see the original 16mm film at twenty-four frames per second in 4:3 aspect; to see the 16mm film slowed by forty per cent to approximately ten frames per second; to see a 'slide show' of the original photographs and at the same time hear the complete unedited twelve-minute recording made in 1970 shortly after the event (see Appendix B: The *Unsculpt* DVD Menu).



Fig 8: the *Unsculpt* DVD with four menu options superimposed over an image of the shrouding of the work, in the foreground right, the video monitor edge.

#### Conclusion

The 'conditional interaction' described by Kalyva identifies the position of the observer and the limits of their participation within the ceremonies of cultural activity. The idea of 'situated action' (Suchman 1987) arising from Heidegger's *dasein*, of *being* (there, in the moment), are all useful in understanding how the event, whether formalised or quotidian, is more often than not intuitively framed by the participant in the process of sharing events as they happen. This is especially true for those events encountered in a cultural, rather than say an industrial or commercial precinct; provisional reasoning, responses or interaction provide a context for understanding what is happening. (SL 15)

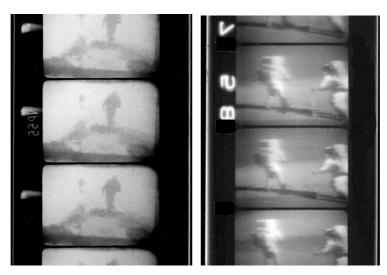


Fig 9: frames enlargement from 16mm film of ONE performance.

For example, during the *ONE* performance, the image of labourers shifting soil from one pile to another in a circle for twelve hours was relayed to street level with CCTV and recorded on film. The image on the monitor in the window of the Angela Flowers Gallery coincided in a completely unplanned way with images of the Apollo moon walkers being relayed to televisions in shop windows in the locality (Fig 9). As two German tourists passing-by were heard to say to one another when inspecting the image on the monitor face: *'Es ist der Mond'* (It's the Moon), to which the other replied, *'Nein, es ist Kunst'* (No, it's art).

(SL 16) Conditional interaction applies in varying ways when encountering analogue media objects restored into the digital domain. Agency affects not only the machine delivering the sound and images, but also allows options for the scale, position and surrounding context for the screen itself. As objects of study, the ideas of the artists are compromised no more than comment and discussion following the original, live performance. The context, place and presence central to the experience of the earlier versions, become replaced by the conditions of interaction proposed by the existence of the document, (the documentary), for study. Discourse from the time of the performances to the present, plays out through different channels – the liner notes essay for DVD, in exhibition catalogues, in books and through online resources, where it is retrieved, refiramed.

The contemporary technologies of digital video in all its forms, in galleries, on the Web, on mobile devices, in appealing to spontaneity and informality, encourages and provokes the reframing of the original event into a new presence. This extends the impetus initiated by the performers of a previous time, bringing about the certainties of ritual and redefining context within the moment of replayed performance.

In 1970 Ian Breakwell posed four questions including the challenging, 'What was *Unword* about?' My part response, it was, '.. about how you can start at one point and keep working it until you've discovered a vanishing point.' (Leggett 1970) Back then it was impossible to predict that in 2010, with the ever-expanding affordances for descriptions of media and performance, for their retrieval and replay in multiple contexts and situations, the vanishing

point, the augmentation of the performances, would become a task of continuous realisation and exploration.

## Acknowledgement

lan Breakwell's creative and fraternal presence remains sorely missed and my appreciation is extended to his partner, Felicity Sparrow, for her comments. The Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London, represents the Estate of Ian Breakwell. With thanks to John Hilliard for his cooperation during the *Unsculpt* restoration; and to Eve Kalyva for stimulating correspondence during the preparation of this paper.

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## Appendix A

Description of the *Unword 2* performance at the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) on 17 October 1969 (Ian Breakwell, c. 1969)

... The audience then passed through to the performance area to find it filled with seemingly impenetrable sheets of paper stretching from ceiling to floor (15 feet high) and covered with words (random extracts from Ian Breakwell's prose texts). [Fig 1]

Two films were projected onto the front wall of words. The first film lasted three minutes and was called 'Language Lesson'; the second film, also lasting three minutes was called 'Bio-Mechanic Man'. A third film was then projected onto the sheets of words, a film demonstrating how to shear sheep; simultaneously a tape-recording of eye-sign test dialogue began to play. Both tape and film continued throughout the subsequent action.

During the subsequent action a film of an aero-engine destroying itself was run continuously onto a side wall in forward then in reverse, and gradually the film itself was physically destroyed by the projectionist.

Five minutes after the beginning of the tape and film, Breakwell appeared from out of the forest of words and slowly began to bite at the sheets and to tear down the sheets of words with his teeth. As he tore down a layer of words

another would be revealed, until eventually he reached the back wall of the room, and the removal of the last sheets of words revealed a seated girl, her body completely enclosed in a white straightjacket. On the front of the straightjacket were stapled a dress, stockings and shoes in the appropriate places; a hat was on her head. Her face remained expressionless.

The projected film-image, which had inevitably increased in size as each layer of word-sheets was removed, now covered the area of the back wall, which included the seated girl.

Breakwell pulled off the clothes, which were fastened to the girl's straightjacket. He nailed the clothes and hat in the outline of a figure onto the wall beside the seated girl. He then took the torn sheets of words, which covered the floor and stapled them to each other and to the girl's straightjacket until the girl and the floor area were covered with words in a kind of robe which stretched to the feet of the audience.

Breakwell exited and John Hilliard entered wearing a polythene suit and carrying a crop-sprayer filled with black paint on his back; he sprayed the complete word-robe. (Breakwell 1969)

## Appendix B

## The Unsculpt DVD Menu

This DVD, made in 2007, brings together those materials and uses four means of presentation:

1. Digital video composite in 16:9 format, with 16mm movie and stills made during the event at the Institute for Research in Art and Technology, (IRAT, or the new London Arts Lab) in February 1970 including an interview with Ian Breakwell made shortly after the event and the statement spoken by John Hilliard during the event, re-recorded by Hilliard in 2007. This digital video edited version brings together all the material in about the sequence it originally occurred, with the film 'slowed down' in several sections.

The material is also shown as individual components:

2. Movie (1970) running at 25 frames per second (fps) with a duration of 1m 25s.

The original 16mm footage was a 'roll end' of less than 100 feet in length, all that could be afforded at the time. The light in the gallery was also at a low level and in order to improve the exposure, the camera was run at the lower speed - 12 fps - that also had the benefit of extending the duration of available film.

3. Movie (1970) showing at 10 fps with a duration of 3m 20s.

As most of the shot lengths were very brief, for reasons given above, this version is the same as at 2, slowed by about forty per cent to enable the movie to be viewed in more detail. (Option: spoken sound commentary by Mike Leggett in 2008, identifying people visible, with reflections and comment on the occasion.)

4. Stills and Interviews, including all the still photographs extent at the time of the 2007 reconstruction, shown as a slide show, together with the unedited interview made with Ian Breakwell by Mike Leggett shortly after the event. (12 mins)

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