

David Medalla

From Biokineticism to Synoptic Realism

Guy Brett

It is November 1989, and David Medalla is working on a painting, due to be shown in "The Other Story" exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, this winter.

The subject of the painting is a 'prophecy'. In the centre the artist has depicted himself facing the viewer with open arms and a calm expression. Behind him a large piece of railway track is being upturned by a group of youths of all races (the image was derived from a 1960's Chinese photograph extolling 'people's war'). In the lower right-hand corner, in a vault-like space, a boy flies down to recover the primordial letters Alpha and Omega. Dispersed over the entire picture are fragmentary images of the world's written scripts, from Dyak pictograms to the computer screen. A text, beginning in the yellow halo (sun) behind the artist's head and continuing over the dark night-like ground, reads:

Une prophétie a l'ombre de la grande arche à Paris, 14 juillet 1989. Je vois le temps avenir quand les analphabètes sortant de l'âge des ténèbres et recouvreront du nid du phoenix les lettres d'or des mots sacrés émises en secret par le soleil.

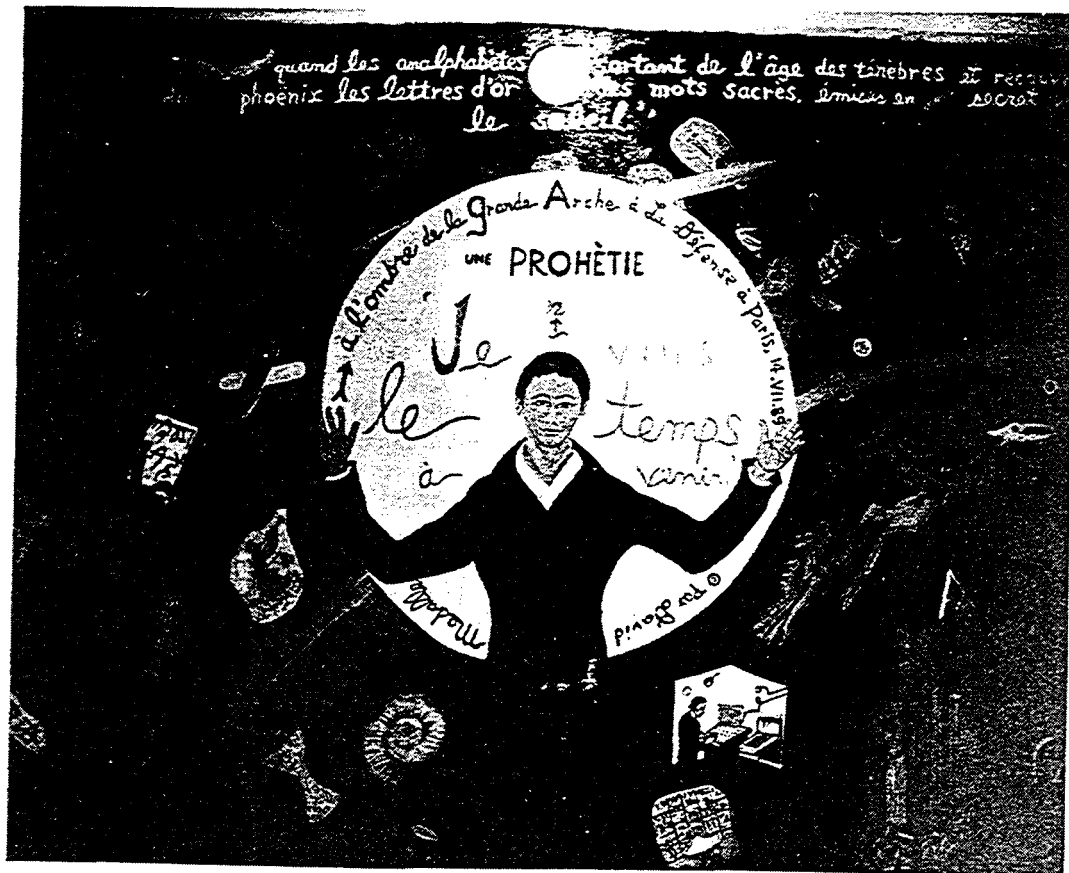
(A prophecy in the shadow of the Great Arch in Paris, 14 July 1989. I see the future time when the illiterate ones will emerge from the age of darkness and recover from the phoenix's nest the golden letters of sacred words secretly emitted by the sun.)

The painting appears to unite several strands in Medalla's previous work. First, the strand of his recent performances, photoworks, and also paintings, which have focussed on himself, often in dialogue with friends, or admired poets, artists and other figures of the past. Second, a group of ink drawings he made in the 1970's called *Africa Liberation*, based on the anti-colonial struggles in

Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, which concentrated on the lives of the guerrillas and freedom-fighters and quite often depicted literacy classes. Third, the combining of contemporary events with references to the traditional mythologies of different cultures, themselves mixed together. And fourth, the notion of 'prophecy', loosely conceived as the dream of a society where the imaginative capacity of every person is liberated.

But why painting? And why a form of realist art from someone who always went beyond the limits of the traditional categories of art? In engaging with painting, we would still expect to find David Medalla carrying through an experimental project. Medalla's paintings, open unsophisticated and welcoming at one level, like his participation pieces, at another level become acutely searching: the attempt to find a way to combine the minutiae of personal experience with the struggles of society, the subjective with the objective, historical movement with those visual pleasures and puzzles which are never solved and never exhausted, beginning with the play of light...

A Prophecy 1989 (detail)



Most of what follows was written six years ago as part of a projected monograph on David Medalla's work, commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain.

For nearly twenty-five years, based mainly in London, David Medalla has been one of the most imaginative and active figures in contemporary art. Unlike many artists who become associated with one style, one 'moment', David Medalla has been a pioneer of ideas and forms in several artistic movements as they have unfolded over the last two decades: Kinetic art in the 1960's, Conceptual, Environmental and Participatory art in the '60s and the early '70s, the move towards more socially and politically conscious art in the mid and late '70s, and Performance art and painting in the late '70s and '80s. And he has been involved with founding galleries, magazines and artists' groups connected with these movements.

However, his activities and achievements remain largely inaccessible and unknown to the 'general public'. He has a wide but 'underground' reputation: the institutions of the art world, with a few notable exceptions, have persistently refused to engage with his work. There are many who would happily admit his influence (an influence of stimulation, challenge, encouragement, rather than of stylistic mannerism), but in museums, magazines and the art market he is still practically invisible.

The French critic Pierre Restany once described David Medalla as "The marginal artist par excellence". The perceptive par excellence seems to hint that this is a person whose absorption in any particular place or artistic 'scene' is profound but completely unofficial. Medalla is the one who knows the art world from top to bottom but has no position in it; the international artist (he travels widely) who does not belong to the international 'circuit'; the local artist (his knowledge of London, as of other cities, is phenomenal) who does not identify with British art; the educator who does not belong to the art school establishment; the exhibitor who has no dealer or gallery; the avant-garde experimenter who paints. Restany's phrase hints that the centrality chosen in the name of independence, and in the belief that everything is worthy of attention, is the marginality dictated by the existing social and cultural order. Medalla's career points up some of the most pertinent contradictions of an artist's struggle to retain creative independence under today's conditions.

The way his work has changed radically in concept and approach over the years, the ephemeral (materially speaking) nature of much of it, his disparate activities, are all liabilities in the present structure of the art world, which insists on a clear identifiable and homogenous product, whether the result is a painting, a sculpture, an 'installation', or even a living person.

David's approach has always been the opposite to this product-oriented formalism. Any particular work of his is apparently 'openly' structured and tends to multiply and proliferate, whether by his own choice or by the participation of others, both friends and strangers. One work is part of another, a theme emerges in different media, there are continual cross-references, allusions and spontaneous additions. It is part of a process which extends from the work itself into his other activities.

Despite the difficulties involved, I believe any description of David Medalla's work should treat his manifold activities together, and not narrow the discussion to what can most easily be recognized as 'art works'. They are all closely connected, for he is not a person who compartmentalises his work and his life. It is remarkable how, at each stage of his evolution, when he has arrived at a turning-point and his work has radically changed, he has almost always followed the same pattern of activities, both artistic and social. All the elements

into three main stages:

1. The period of kinetics (c. 1963-1967). Concentrating on the relationship with nature in an elemental form.
2. The period of participation (c. 1967-1976). Concentrating on the relationships with other people, and the interaction of nature and culture, art and politics.
3. The period of performance and painting 'Synoptic Realism' (c. 1975-). Concentrating on the relationship between his own experience, his subjectivity and the range of realities in which people live: historical, mythological, economic, cultural, psychological and linguistic.

A possible way of looking at this development would be to see it as a continuously evolving and expanding reflection on reality as the dialectical product of movement, motion.

In his kinetic works, like his Bubble Machines, David investigated this enigma through the metaphor of elemental nature: biomorphic forms continuously self-creating and self-destructing. With his Participation-Production pieces of the 1970's (e.g. *Stitch In Time*, *Eskimo Carver*), David brought other people into the equation, not as static entities objectified by the artist, but as spontaneous manifestations of their own creative energies and imaginations. All of David's more recent work — his performances, paintings, impromptus, photoworks — could be seen as a highly sophisticated reinvention of the mask theme, or the masquerade. Constantly changing masks — and these could be a piece of music or a gesture as much as a face covering — conjure up the constantly shifting modes and models of reality through which we live our lives. His performances, for example, involve not only quick changes of mood and theme, but also changes of gender, location, historical period, social type, and they treat many hackneyed and kitsch-type of situations as equally workable material as the epoch-making and lofty. In fact today the significant can't be separated from the trivial, or the truth from the lie, by assuming some aloof position of superior wisdom, but only be sifting every kind of event/sign for its liberating possibilities.

A NOTE ABOUT DISTANT ORIGINS

I met David Medalla in 1960, a few weeks after he first arrived in England, So I have known him personally for the twenty years or so that these notes cover. I feel unable to write about the earlier part of his life. And yet, to say nothing about something as important as birthplace and childhood, seems to me alienating. Therefore, I have pieced together a few notes, taken mainly from a letter which Medalla wrote to me from Venice in 1980, describing what he considers some of his formative influences.

David was born into a large extended family. In a third world, pre-television, aristocratic ambience; families entertained themselves. Poetry, painting, music, plays and puppet shows were made at home and performed in the garden of the big family house in the Ermita district of Manila.

His family had relatives all over the Philippines, a country which consists of more than 7000 islands. Summer trips to stay with distant relatives were revelations of tropical nature. They would pass through the Visayan Islands, where at the age of nine he saw for the first time flying fish and the marble island of Romblon. One night, travelling in a darkened bus near Mt. Kanlaon

in Negros Oriental province, he saw a valley entirely filled with fire flies.

Another powerful memory is his first sight of the Banaue rice-terraces in the mountain province north of Manila. This vast, intricate construction of agricultural man is two thousand years old and still in use.

Right next to the wealthy district of Ermita was a shanty-town. David crossed it every day to attend his organ lessons in the church of San Agustin in Intramuros. The inhabitants were poor country people who had come to Manila looking for work. They speared snakes and grilled them for food. Manila, immediately after the war, was covered with ruined buildings, bombed by the American 'liberating' forces, and littered with abandoned pieces of military equipment. The port was crowded with foreign ships and David liked to hang around there to practice his English and talk to sailors about their home countries.

Manila (as opposed to the Philippines as a whole) was one of the great mestizo cities, in human beings and in culture. Intramuros, the old walled city, was designed by the Spanish. The church where David learned the organ is a fantastic Spanish colonial baroque building, with a pair of Ming Dynasty guardian lions in the front courtyard. His artistic education was always a mixture of East and West. His elder sister taught him the principles of Chinese painting and the importance of the Chi'i (breath, force, the vital principal in classical Chinese art). The first great European, and indeed Oriental, works of art that he saw were in New York in the mid '50s, where he went as a teenager to study modern philosophy and Greek drama at Columbia University. In New York he started to paint. José Garcia Villa, the Filipino expatriate poet and the American poet, E. E. Cummings, who lived in Greenwich Village, encouraged him to become a professional painter.

Returning to the Philippines in the late '50s, he attended the lectures on art given by the painter Fernando Zobel de Ayala (founder of the first museum of Spanish Abstract art in the Casas Colgades — the hanging houses of Cuenca, Spain), and made friends with the artists of the small Philippine avant-garde. Several of them were already keen followers of Abstract Expressionism. Though it was still an obscure experimental movement far away in New York, it was known to them through the family of Alfonso Osorio, a friend of Jackson Pollock.

Something of all these influences can be seen in the early paintings David produced from the mid-'50s up until his first kinetic constructions made in London in 1963. There is the influence of Roman Catholic and Protestant (Anglican) cultures, the abundance of tropical nature and the glare of sunlight, the technique of the abstract expressionists and premonitions of future works: superimposition, collage, the incorporation of fragments of graffiti, poems, sea shells, sand and animal bones.

Poetry and literature, in fact, have been as important to David as visual art. When he first lived in London, he was writing poetry rather than painting. But he began to concentrate on visual art partly because painting, he felt, was a more international language. Poetry and writing still accompanied his work in the '60s and '70s, and came into its own again with the visual-musical-literary form of his performances, in the '80s.

BIOKINETICS

To understand the appearance of Kinetic art as a movement, one has to recall something of the cultural climate of the time: the late '50s and early '60s. It

was a very contracted time. In France, the mood was set by the insipid tachistes and the so-called Ecole de Paris; in the USA by the much more powerful but basically introspective paintings of the New York Abstract Expressionists; in Britain, by the kind of paintings and sculpture which Herbert Read had labelled 'The Geometry of Fear'.

Whatever their differing qualities, these manifestations were united in virtually blotting out what had been done by the pioneers of modern art in the '20s and '30s. The dissatisfied, and searching, young artists who later came to be labelled Kinetic were leaders in a wider movement that began to bring to light again the liberating energy of the diverse individuals and groups of early modernists.

The new movement was deeply attracted to these modernist pioneers for their social vision, their diverse propositions for taking art out of the studio and salon into the street, into technology, into architecture. Stimulated by the economic boom of the time, there were many optimistic experiments and much discussion between artists and scientists, architects and technologists.

Naturally, this link with early modernism was only one facet of Kinetic Art. In fact, the problem of going beyond mere 'motorized versions' of the forms and space of the early modern artists, towards a new space, a new structure, closer to the spiritual needs of the time, was clearly expressed in the enormous gulf between the pedestrian and the imaginative artists which was so characteristic of Kinetic Art as a movement. It was David Medalla's daring, elegant and poetic solutions to these problems which made his work especially outstanding.

In an unpublished *Memoir on Motion* (1960s), he has described in detail the mixture of personal experience, thought and study of art which led to the making of his Bubble Machines. Before that time, 'movement' had been for him, as for most people, an unquestioned part of the flux of experience:

Simply because we are part of the vast complex of movements we call life, it does not automatically follow that we become aware of it, or even the essential aspect of it...I had only experienced the effects of movement without really experiencing their essence.¹

A personal event, which he does not specify, gave him a sudden awareness of duration: 'Duration implies continuity in time and space, and comprehensible continuity, or rhythm, is the essence and identity of movement'.²

With these vague feelings in mind, he went by chance with a friend to visit a brewery in Edinburgh (November, 1961). As they walked around, he became 'more and more excited by the sight of the immense copper cauldrons containing foaming beer'.³ After the visit they climbed up King Arthur's Seat and watched the clouds racing overhead:

The image of the foaming beer, the sight of the clouds, the fantastic shapes that the clouds formed and unformed in the afternoon sky, these things started me into thinking of the possibilities of making works of art which could generate themselves, change shapes and forms continually as the clouds did in the sky. I felt immensely excited...However, I did not know how to go about making a sort of art that would reveal the process of growth and disintegration not simply by inference but by actual presence.⁴

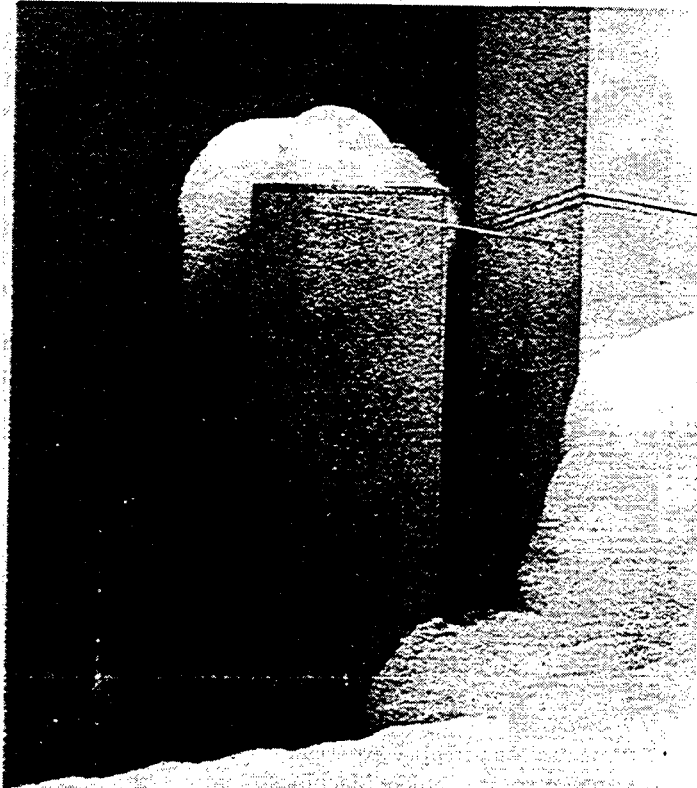
Two years later, having internalised this stimulus together with earlier ones — the sunsets over Manila bay, a foaming rice dessert that his mother used to cook, the Kinetic works of Takis and Soto, he finally produced his 'growing

1 David Medalla,
*Biokinetics: A Memoir on
Motion*, London 1967
(unpublished), p1.

2 *ibid*, p2.

3 *ibid*, p3.

4 *ibid*, p3.



DAVID MEDALLA: CLOUD CANYONS: BUBBLE MOBILES 1964. PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAY PERRY.

"... the universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine... The old dualism of mind and matter... seems likely to disappear, and through matter becoming in any way more shadowy or insubstantial than hitherto, or through mind becoming resolved into a function of the working of matter, but through substantial matter resolving itself into a creation and manifestation of mind... A soap bubble with irregularities and corrugations on its surface is perhaps the best representation, in terms of simple and familiar materials, of the new universe revealed to us by the theory of relativity."
—Sir James Jeans.

"IF YOU LIKE I SHALL GROW
IRREPROACHABLY GENTLE,
NOT A MAN, BUT A CLOUD
IN TROUSERS. . ."

Vladimir Mayakovsky.

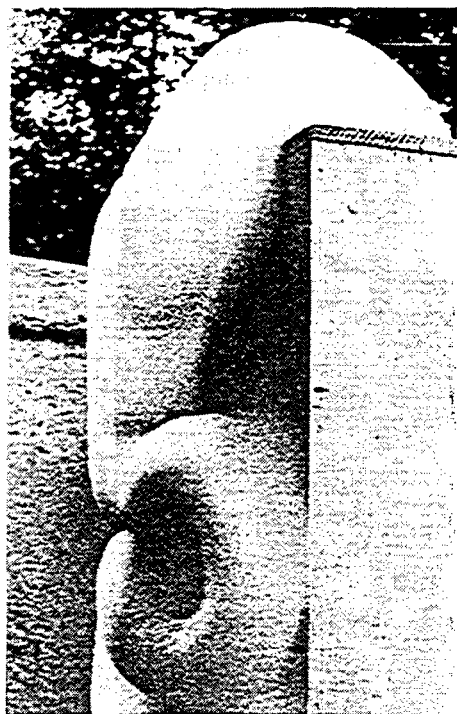
With the five bubble machines exhibited this year in London David Medalla has achieved a leading position in art. A quarter million forms continuously changing, reflecting, growing, disintegrating. Random activity is at present among the most crucial questions in art. Apart from other contributions his works have made, Medalla has shown conclusively that random activity in material/transforming art is capable of achieving not only the most complex forms and motions but also an aesthetic context of the highest order.
—Gustav Metzger.

Bubbles in Sight over Cornwall Gardens



Centre spread from Signals Newsbulletin No 2, September 1964, showing Cloud Canyons, bubble mobiles, 1964. Photos by Clay Perry.

Portrait of David Lewis de Medeiros by Clay Perry



and disintegrating sculpture': the Bubble Machine.

His first experiments were conducted in a small room on the rue de Canettes, Paris. A prototype of the Bubble Machine was exhibited at an exhibition at the Redfern Gallery, London, in March, 1964 (along with the first smoke machine), but the work became much better known with the ensemble of Bubble Machines Medalla made (with technical assistance from Paul Keeler) later in the same year, and titled *Cloud Canyons*. Serial ensembles were made soon after, the most monumental of which served as the centrepiece of the Kinetic Art show held at the Ideal Home Exhibition, Olympia, in 1967.

It was fascinating the way in which the Bubble Machines combined in one device so many of the aspirations of the Kinetic movement. Here, there was no longer the single moulded shape characteristic of 'biomorphic abstraction', but an endless sequence of shapes growing organically from one to the next. Here, there was no longer the creation of form out of inert matter by the will of a single individual, but forms self-created by the energies of the material and the surrounding environmental conditions. Here, there was no longer the traces of movement and energy frozen for ever, but a dialectical process which showed the disintegration of form, as much as its creation. Gustav Metzger, who at the time was engaged in his own original experiments and theory of auto-destruction and random activity in art, was the first to write about these implications of the Bubble Machines.

The sense of freedom given by such an apparently simply idea, based on a commonplace process known to everyone, drew an excited response from scientists as well as artists. The English crystallographer J.D. Bernal saw the Bubble Machines at Signals, London, in 1964; the physicist Werner Heisenberg wrote Medalla a letter in 1965, praising his demonstration of the poetic interactions between human-made technology and natural phenomena.

The Bubble Machine was indeed both 'concept' and personal expression. A particular feeling for nature enabled Medalla to filter the predictable and monotonous movements of the electric motors (which ultimately powered all his kinetic pieces) into a complex and tender expression of energy. This was the quality noticeably lacking in much kinetic art. For one of the questions then, in using real sources of energy in art, was how one could get away from slick packaging, design, diverting effects, towards the sources in their nakedness and their link with the forces of life inside oneself. Medalla lived with *Cloud Canyons*, continually working on the balcony of his flat in Cornwall Gardens for several months in the summer and autumn of 1964. Clay Perry, who took the photographs which are all that survive of it, remembers being called up sometimes in the middle of the night to come over and photograph a particular effect.

Medalla later gave the name *Biokinetics* to all his work of this period. The basic unit of the Bubble Machine, the single soap-bubble, was analogous to the biological cell, and he began to explore the sculptural possibilities of other pulverised, elastic and soluble materials, producing a typically abundant list:

Water, grains of rice, gold and silver dust, sand, fire, powdered coal, granulated coffee-beans, dried seeds, rubber, gum, mud, ice, salt, oil, steam, mist, smoke, etc.⁵

Some of these were realized as physical objects and as installations. Each had a particular quality of movement linked, often humorously, with the idiosyncracies of the material. The Sand Machine, a talismanic object that David has kept with

⁵ *ibid.*, p7.

him through all his moves, translated the snake motif of early paintings into enigmatic motion: a machine-snake or a helical structure which seemed to be quivering at the end of an old world and the beginning of a new. The Mud Machine was a pure transformation of mechanical rationality into sensuous play, (making, incidentally, a witty reference to Tinguely's "Painting Machine", by translating the latter's frantic agitation into poised gestures reminiscent of classical Chinese calligraphy). David had the material resources to build only a few of these machines, and then in a rough form. In any case, these physical objects were only one kind of sign of a general attitude, a view of the world and the present moment, which was equally well expressed in drawings, collages and in the verbal form of fantasy propositions, which give dimensions and inflections impossible in any other way.

THE EXPLODING GALAXY

Around 1966-67 a number of factors combined to bring David Medalla to a turning point in his life and art. One has to describe them in sequence, but they were probably simultaneous and interwoven. To begin with, Signals closed in the autumn of 1966, ending a major source of his daily activities. David ran the Signals Showrooms in Wigmore Street with Paul Keeler and he also edited the remarkable Signals Newsbulletin. Together they agitated, not only for Kinetic Art, but for a whole kinetic attitude which touched on science, architecture, poetry and politics as well.

He was forced to change his living conditions, but, on the other hand, he wanted to. Signals had been a non-profit organization (non-solvent would probably be a better word) with a truly interdisciplinary and internationalist outlook, but it still remained within the framework of professionalised art. And it was around this time, as a result of hundreds of independent initiatives taken by young people who had nothing to do with the established art world, that the orthodox view of creativity was beginning to be radically questioned. In the area of his own work, David had become increasingly interested in the capacity of his Kinetic sculptures to take on a life of their own, to change and grow, outside his direct control. He began to see that this could extend beyond the elemental-nature metaphor:

I felt at that time a deep dissatisfaction towards all art that derives solely from one single person, and is determined by one person's ideas and wishes. True, in my (kinetic) works, I gave up my role as creator for the benefit of an auxiliary function: that of 'transmitter' or 'initiator'. Ultimately, what became the true creators were: electrochemical forces, the elements in motion, light. A total submission to acts of chance, a complete acceptance of every incident, this has characterized my works since 1961....I wanted to share my thoughts and feelings with the spectator who has been kept at an almost unreachable distance by the established art of our time. I wanted to break down the invisible barrier between 'creator' and 'spectator', (for art to become) a living process in which one, two or several people formulate suggestions that others take up and develop in different directions...⁶

Later he was to give form to these ideas as 'participation-production' pieces which could be installed in a gallery or similar place, but at this time the framework had to be something much wider:

I thought: why not create a situation where dance, poetry, singing, painting and sculpture could co-operate and penetrate each other as they do in the great historical cultures? Yes, why not!!! And with that intention I went around London in the beginning of 1967, among strangers and friends, and invited all interested to join me....London in the beginning of 1967 was full of fermenting creativity, of signs of renewal. The public became aware of the sudden appearance of what

⁶ David Medalla, *The Exploding Galaxy*, Paletten No 1, Stockholm 1968, p1.

the press immediately called 'The Flower People'...I called my original suggestion 'The Exploding Galaxy', as I thought this name sufficiently flexible to contain and inspire all sorts of activity.⁷

7 *ibid*, p1.

The Exploding Galaxy which lasted for about two years was the typical grouping that everyone associates with the hippy Sixties. But the Galaxy was also special because it linked the hippy lifestyle consciously with a philosophy of creativity and artistic practice which aspired towards a kind of lived poetry, or lived metaphor. Nothing — an object, piece of clothing, a place, a person — had one single meaning or one single role. New meanings and roles could be found in everything, and life was to be lived according to a continuous exploration of these multiple meanings. It was well expressed at the time by one of the Exploders, Edward Pope:

8 Edward Pope, writing in *Planted!*, compiled and published by Paul Keeler, London 1968.

Everyone of us became a walking justification of his own life, and honesty became a necessity for those who wished to inspire others with the creative way of life. You might see one of us on a bus, wearing clothes that could be call neither respectable or bohemian, but you might call them bizarre, were it not for the sense in them, or you might call them jokes, were they not also full of inventive imagination and poetry. People ask: 'Why do you wear that?', 'what is that?' and we explain, in a simple way, how, by treating things in one's life with fresh imagination, by changing their purpose, like wearing a cushion for a hat, turning an umbrella into a newspaper, or a bus into a church, one penetrates the pretence that life is humdrum, and comes to see one's own life transformed as part of the life of the imagination, the life that gives meaning and makes history.⁸

Members of the Exploding Galaxy performing *The Buddha Ballet* at Parliament Hill Fields, London, 1968. Medalla reads the text of the story



While trying to practice this as a daily mode of behaviour, the Galaxy also worked towards planned performances, which were basically dance-dramas in form. Some were held at theatres for a ticket-buying public, but there was no 'right' place to perform:

Many of our explorations took place in London streets, buses, tubes, market-places, post-offices, social security offices, railway stations, museums, cafes, cinemas, lavatories, squares, everywhere...⁹

⁹ David Medalla, *The Exploding Galaxy*, op. cit., p2.

Costumes were worked up out of garbage and all kinds of found materials. No one was allowed to assume a specialised role (poet, dancer, actor, musician, director, costume-designer) permanently. Everyone took turns, with results which were unpolished, unpredictable, but containing moments of amazing poetry. Despite poverty and marginalization, it was from groups like the Galaxy that the real ideas of the time came, though they were later exploited by others and lost their wider implications and social energy.

The Galaxy, naturally, had its own internal conflicts. Dominant personalities emerged, however much the specialised roles were exchanged. And these personalities (David Medalla was one) had their separate ideas and followers. The Galaxy eventually split, or rather, 'exploded'. But virtually all those involved would today defend it as a positive experience.

Medalla's own work with the Galaxy evolved towards a series of dance dramas performed weekly with spectator participation outdoors at Parliament Hill Fields: *The Buddha Ballet*. The young American artist John Dugger was also closely involved. These dance dramas were based on Buddhist stories and texts and legends from various cultures. Questions of King Milinda, for example, was:

based on a classic Buddhist text which is the most brilliant synthesis of Ionian Greek dialectics and Indian psychology....What happened was that the hundreds of people who came to Parliament Hill were formed into a big human body which then walked around the hill! Some people were part of the brain, some were part of the hands, some were part of the legs. If you were in the toes, you would not be able to see the shoulders, the body was so large. The kids who were running around trying to make trouble and pull the thing apart, we decided to incorporate them as fleas and lice in the hair of the head. Then, five people forming one of the hands held a gigantic comb, so that the kids would be combed out of the hair. It was really incredible! This took place every Sunday from May until October, and each week we would think of a new action for the body, scratching itself, or clapping hands. I remember that clapping was very difficult to synchronize, because the two hands kept missing each other!¹⁰

¹⁰ David Medalla, *In Conversation with Brandon Taylor*, Artscribe No 6, London April 1977, p21.

At the time, some saw all this as a retreat into the past and into primitivism on David's part, after the scientific inspiration of his kinetic sculptures; an exotic escape unrelated to the realities of life in Western Europe. Others saw it differently. Rasheed Araeen suggested to me one day that this period of the Galaxy represented for David the beginning of a re-absorption in his own cultural roots. It could not be exotic for him, because his own origins were in Asia. And certainly, this whole question was to become of great importance in the '70s and '80s with the upsurge of the anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements.

Both these observations are partly true. But the reality, characteristically, is more complex. David's upbringing was strongly influenced by the Anglo-American and Catholic strains in the culture of the Philippines. Indian art was actually something more exotic for him than for the British, with their Imperial

connections. He first learned about Indian art from reading Heinrich Zimmer's *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, and about Chinese culture by reading Osvald Siren's book on Chinese painting and J.D. Branston's book on the early Ming pottery of Ching-te-Chen.

The turn towards a 'primitivism' in the materials and methods of the art work had different implications if seen in a world, rather than merely a western-industrial, context. On the one hand, the 1970s were to see the United States, the most powerful industrial and military country in the world, defeated by a small South East Asian society of peasants. On the other hand, technology in the rich countries was not leading to greater liberation, but was building up into the nightmare of pollution, waste, surveillance and personal isolation. Many sensed a common outlook uniting the National Liberation Movements in the Third World with the criticism of capitalist alienation in the West, an outlook which placed the living human being in the centre. The feeling is I think caught perfectly in a couplet of Brecht's written many years before:

From the new transmitters came the old stupidities
Wisdom was passed on from mouth to mouth.

POLITICISATION

Another turning-point in David Medalla's life was reached with the disintegration of the Exploding Galaxy around 1968 and the subsequent long trip he took with John Dugger in Asia and Africa. Some other members of the Galaxy joined them in Kerala, South India to study at source the Kathakali dance-drama, one of the big influences in the Galaxy. But the real outcome of this long journey, which ended when Medalla returned to Paris in 1970, was a politicisation brought about by the impact of everyday life in Third World countries. A solo exhibition at the Camden Arts Centre, soon after his return in May 1971, reflected the mingling of Buddhist ideas with Marxist thinking.

He now read Marxist texts as avidly as he had read Buddhist ones. Only the Marxist method and insights seemed capable of explaining the huge social contradictions which were so overt in the Third World, and providing a framework for effective action. Another effect of his travels was to make him aware of culture in a new way. Study of the few isolated pieces collected in Western museums had been one thing, but it had only given an inkling of the extraordinary variety of the creations of so many different groups of people in the world, and it had failed completely to convey the way in which culture is part of the life-experience and history of each people. He was impressed by Lenin's idea that every national culture contains popular and democratic elements. The movement towards liberation was simultaneously a political and cultural effort.

David Medalla was active early in the movement of the growing politicisation of art. Sensing his own reality in its political dimension, David became mainly concerned with Third World struggles and the activities of solidarity and publicity so important in the Western metropolises.

Again there was a linked development in his own work and in the formation of an artists' group. If the Exploding Galaxy had a hippy style, Artists for Democracy (AFD), which began to come together early in 1974, was modelled on a political organisation, with chairman (sic), secretary, regular meetings, minutes, votes etc. If the Galaxy had aimed to affect the public through their appearance and behaviour — person-to-person in the daily routine of a big



Literacy Class in the Forest drawing from the *Africa Liberation* series, 1974

city — the members of AFD were inspired by the idea that one's artistic work could actually have an effect on historical events by linking up with the liberation movements of masses of people in different parts of the world. AFD organized the Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile at the Royal College of Art, London, in 1974, and then opened a cultural centre at 143 Whitfield Street, W1. There, among many other events, an exhibition by the American Indian Movement was held in 1976 as a challenge to Sacred Circles, an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery that used traditional Indian art to boost the American Bicentennial.

As far as Medalla's own work was concerned, his politicisation led to something of a split between his visual art and his writing. Most of the texts he produced at this period imitate Marxist state discourse, down to the smallest mannerisms and turns of phrase. They contain good ideas, but the ritual tone is alienating and dates quickly. His artistic work, however, was much more subtle. In a remarkable way, he was able to gather up his previous concerns — with nature, with the creative process as the work of many different minds and bodies — and weave them together with concrete political references. This comes for example in his 1974 series of twenty-five black-ink drawings, 'Africa Liberation'. They were inspired by the liberation movements of the peoples of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, then entering into their decisive phase. On 26th October, 1971, I went with David to hear Amílcar Cabral, leader of the PAIGC, the liberation movement of Guinea-Bissau, speak at the Central Hall, Westminster. The way in which he explained all the aspects of his people's struggle, his attitude towards the enemy, his humour, impressed us deeply. The drawings were based on photographs borrowed from the solidarity organizations in London, but freely interpreted. As a series, they aimed to show the interrelated life of fighting, learning, producing, healing, making music, and so on, being carried out in the liberated areas. The human figures are interwoven with speeches, songs and with the land, the forest, in which and for which the struggle was being carried on. Their style, without being slick or folkloric, like a sort of poetic literacy manual, has the same awakening, 'new beginning' quality as the political movement they celebrate.

Also at this period, David produced a number of 'participation production' pieces which cast the workings of international capitalism into metaphoric games for the public to take part in: *Down with the Slave Trade* (1970), *The Money Game* (1971) and *The International Dust Market* (1972), for example.

Three works, however, stand out as the richest, both in concept and in realization: *A Stitch in Time* (first version 1968), *Porcelain Wedding* (first version 1973) and *Eskimo Carver* (1977). These are, for me, the most fascinating works of avant-garde art of the period in Britain. The political content was not on an explicit level, because they were not 'issue-oriented' and their mode of functioning was not the opinion-forming, propagandistic. Ideas formed in *The Exploding Galaxy* period, when a group of people lived and created works of art together, here became focussed through physical structures erected in a public space and open for any passer-by to enter. Those taking part found themselves in a situation where, in the act of giving something of their inner nature, they were made to reflect in a playful way on the contemporary dialectical opposites of work and leisure, the individual and the collective.

PARTICIPATION-PRODUCTION

Back in 1965, Signals had exhibited the work of a Brazilian artist, Lygia Clark. A real pioneer and profound thinker, the importance of her propositions for the future of art have still not been properly appreciated. In essence, Lygia Clark disposed of art as an object 'out there', frozen, a sign to arouse aesthetic feelings or intellectual ideas in a spectator. During the '60s, using simple materials like rubber bands, stones water, air, plastic bags, she made devices with no independent existence. They come to life only when worn, handled or exchanged by people. They work directly on a person's senses and body, challenging them, impeding them, connecting them with those of others, reaching inner levels of intimate identity by the most deceptively simple means. "A sensuous energy lies deep in our social habits", Lygia was saying, and art should be a way of becoming conscious of it, a preparation for life.

David was among those delighted by Lygia's ideas. There was so much to be explored in this proposal of a new relationship between artist and 'spectator'. His interpretation was very different to hers. Whereas she was concerned with the internal, the biological-ontological sensation of being, he was concerned with the outward, with the human being as producer and consumer, with historical processes and the realities of everyday life. He called the works that he did at this time 'Participation-production' pieces. It sounds solemn, in a way. Actually, David threw 'production' into a very paradoxical light.

Several versions of *A Stitch in Time* were set up in galleries in different cities and countries between about 1969 and 1972. All basically consisted of a rope structure by which cotton-reels, bobbins large and small, with many different coloured threads, were suspended over long sheets of cotton, themselves suspended, on which people could sew anything they liked. The structure resembled an early suspension bridge, a vertebra, a hammock, sails, a factory production line, or the long table of a communal feast. It was very easy to find oneself drawn into taking part. Only then you wondered how much time

A Stitch In Time. Version installed at Art Meeting Place, London, 1974



you would give, and what you would leave behind of yourself. The way the given conditions worked upon the passer-by has been described by David himself:

Each one in his or her own time could be involved in a very simple activity, which is stitching, which anybody can do and in the process of stitching in fact, you will find that again, in the rhythm of the stitching, the actual material will determine its half of the whole rhythm. Take a person who is very extrovert vis-a-vis that work, he has to thread the needle... There's a real relationship between the material and the person and the actual process is contemplative, because it's a minimal function, that's why stitching, like all forms of needlework, has a very therapeutic value, because you have to concentrate, you know, not only on threading the needle but in making your statement, whatever it is...¹¹

11 *ibid.*

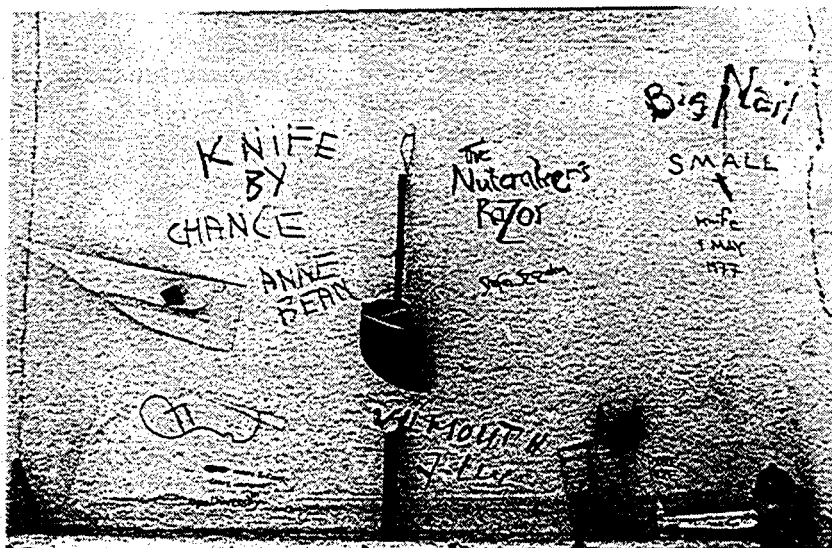
One of the subtle paradoxical experiences of this work was that although on the one hand you were given the invitation to make graffiti, on the other, you found yourself in a situation where you had to commit care, thought, you had to give attention to the difficulties of the material, to the productions of the people next to you, and so on. Graffiti is usually taken as the most unrestricted opportunity people have for self-expression, the most direct expression of desire. *A Stitch in Time* has this aspect of graffiti, but sets it against factors belonging to the discipline and social responsibility of production.

Some of the cotton sheets embroidered by many hands in those years have been kept, and they are curious objects which can be seen on several levels. From a distance they look like abstract paintings. From closer-to, words and images begin to appear, giving a whole sociology of the public, political and private opinions of the kinds of people who would visit avant-garde exhibitions in European cities at the time. Then, at another level, come the non-overt meanings: the crabbed or the expansive design, the appetite for colour, conformism or experiment, humour or solemnity, is revealed inescapably in each contribution. By means of a kind of art which goes beyond the 'observing eye', depicting external bits of perceptual reality, central to some traditions of art of the past, a visual portrayal is nevertheless made of the conflicts, relationships, values and possible future of the community in which the artist lives.

Eskimo Carver, the final show at AFD's Whitfield Street cultural centre, was possibly an even simpler proposition in terms of its concept, and even more revealing of the psychology of the people taking part, and of the political-philosophical questions around 'production'.

This event came together from several inspirational sources. One was the chance finding by David (in a dustbin near the Centre Pompidou in Paris) of a photo of an Eskimo man carving a tiny ivory seal with a bow-drill. Another was reading Eskimo poems in Tom Lowenstein's reworkings of Rasmussen's transcription taken in the 1930s. A third was the idea for a performance in which each of the main periods of human history would be encapsulated by the form of a particular *knife*. So, in a setting of his drawings of Eskimo life and transcriptions of Eskimo poetry, David invited people to make knives, or drums, out of non-perishable garbage which had been collected from the neighbourhood and piled in a corner.

The ambience opened people's minds in a certain way. The Eskimo people have given some of the most succinct descriptions that exist of the mixture of desire/anxiety/pleasure in the urge to compose poems and songs. They also have a non-professional practice of creating them:



Eskimo Carver, Artists For Democracy: Fitzrovia Cultural Centre, London, 1977. Detail of some of the knives made and titled by visitors

The Eskimos hardly ever sing or perform the songs of others. Every man and woman, sometimes even children, has his own poems; and this despite the fact that it is justifiably regarded as a large-scale and difficult task to create a good new song.¹²

Knud Rasmussen, 1930

Over the period of several weeks of the exhibition, each knife or drum was titled and signed and added to the collection on the walls. Everyone, including the artist, was astonished by the variety of people's contributions:

12 Knud Rasmussen, quoted in *Eskimo Poems from Canada and Greenland*, trans. Tom Lowenstein, London: Alison and Busby, 1973.

You cannot say that one knife is better than another... It is really a show — or a concept if you like — that effectively destroys the idea of the unique art object. Each of the knives is unique and every single one has a quality of its own and yet what is interesting is the aggregate — if you put such a proposition in a public place, literally it's an endless proposition, there is no end to people coming in and making knives. I could easily inundate, say, the Tate Gallery...

The second thing that is fascinating about it for me is the kind of significations that occur: because each of the objects, by being given the specific concept of KNIFE (we know what knives are and how they are used), and the people, being given a range of materials which they did not make any decision in the choosing of... in the process certain things are revealed about, I think, the psychology of people ... because they range from very functional-looking knives to knives of an amazing kind of fantasy...¹³

13 David Medalla, interview with Steve Thorne, London 1977 (unpublished)

The basis of the piece in a common and useful object, the knife, also became an aesthetic and philosophical springboard. All the objects retain the semblance of their use-value, but also become connected with every possible reverie and desire: 'love knife', 'invisible knife', 'knife by chance', 'vanity knife', 'mis-used knife', 'gay young blade', etc. It was a witty and tangible way of laying open to view the relationship between the practical and fantastic sides of the human psyche.

This is nothing more, perhaps, than a description of collage — the artistic form most characteristic of the twentieth century. Collage is obviously bound

up with the nature of an urban society and a proliferation of consumer goods. But in its original, subversive meaning it implies seeing the world from the opposite point of view from the passive consumer, because it refuses to accept the narrow nature or use which defines objects as commodities, and on which the whole profit system is based. Originally — before it was tamed by the taste of wealthy collectors and the suburban values of do-it-yourself manuals — collage combined poetry and social criticism. *Eskimo Carver* recovered this original energy of collage.

In these participatory works of Medalla, one saw, by actual physical evidence, that artistic processes are not frozen, trapped in objects sanctified in museums, but are widely and passionately present in people at large. It is just that our society rarely asks for evidence of it. David knew how to ask, to “infuse people with a certain kind of enthusiasm, to trust their own capacity to be creators”.¹⁴ This ambience even depended to some extent on his presence, his character, and could hardly be recreated by bureaucratic decisions. If they had limitations in the sense of referring only to simple manual technologies in their metaphor for production, these pieces did generate a high awareness of what was *humanly* involved in producing individually and collectively.

14 *ibid.*

COMPLEXITY OF CAUSES

In November 1979 Medalla left England for the Continent. Material problems and a growing feeling of injustice at the measly rewards of twenty years of David’s work in England had come to seem intolerable. For the next two years, he travelled in Europe — France, Italy, Spain — giving performances, writing and drawing, depending almost entirely on human contacts and friendships for food and shelter.

In a conversation published in *Black Phoenix* in 1979, David and Rasheed Araeen assessed the work of AFD and the relationship attempted there between art and politics:

Araeen: I got interested in AFD because of its orientation towards the problems of the Third World. But I think, AFD merely became a sort of support organization and it didn’t really address itself to the basic and essential ideological issues regarding the cultural relationship between the Third World and the West. Don’t you think it was the failure of AFD not to deal with this question, of cultural imperialism, particularly vis-a-vis radical artistic practice?

Medalla: Yes I think in that respect it was a failure... We had many cultural workers; the artists who would support all these struggles but had little knowledge of actual politics. On the other hand, there were the political radicals who came to AFD, but they had no desire whatsoever even to look at a drawing or a painting or listen to a poem.¹⁵

At the same time this conversation was recorded, the two nations which had seemed to be in the process of building up a new kind of human society (celebrated in many of Medalla’s works) — China guided by Mao Zedong Thought and Vietnam struggling for its independence — had apparently changed course. Each had begun to turn towards one of the two dominant centres of world power: China towards the West and Vietnam towards Russia, aligning themselves with social models equally unenlightened and hidebound in their different ways. Medalla’s view was that there had always been throughout history these ‘centres of power’, which had had an overwhelming influence on the rest of the world: an influence economic, political and, above

15 Rasheed Araeen, *Conversation with David Medalla*, Black Phoenix No 3, London Spring 1979, p17.



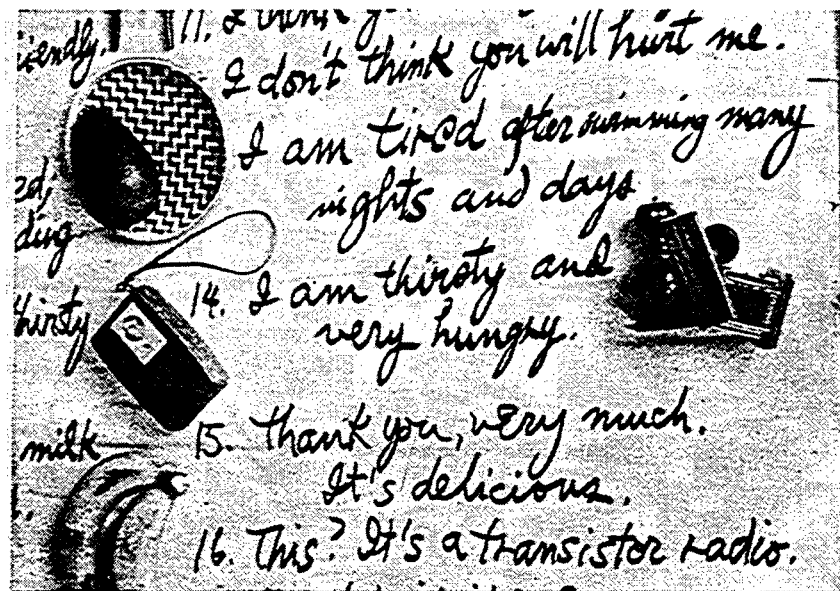
Boys Of England: A Feverish Triumph, collage book, 1977-78

all, cultural. Throughout this conversation there is a certain wariness of blinding oneself with politics. On an individual level, there seemed a great difference between understanding what politics is (becoming politicised and acting politically), and making it into a total reality:

I don't think politics is everything of humanity. It's like religion which is not everything of humanity....And that is what's so fucked up about most human beings, because they are either religious or political or artistic or scientific or something else rather than human. To be truly human, one must be all of these things at every instant of one's life. To substitute one feeling for another would be alienating and ridiculous. 16

16 *ibid*, p18.

These thoughts evidently lay behind the new direction Medalla's work began to take. Its range of reference widened, its sense of paradox, irony and contradiction was greatly enriched. He seemed, now, to be searching for new forms to convey the complex of determining factors in which particular individuals and groups of people live, the 'moving whole' of gender, class, culture, language, sexuality, the individual's perception of history, of myth, and many other things. What is imagination, what is creativity, in relation to these determinants? Not surprisingly, he began to explore these realities primarily through his own subjectivity. His work moved sharply from external political reference towards dealing with his own life, his own place in the world



Conversation Bi-Langue: Tagalog-Español, part of the performance *The Beachcomber's Dream Tree*, by David Medalla and Brian Morgan. Finborough Theatre, Earls Court, London, 1987. (Photo: Guy Brett).

around him. But, again, I think it was done with a dialectical consciousness: subjective identity was explored through the perception of so-called objective facts. This led him to the re-exploration of certain traditional arenas of individual identity: dandyism, masquerade, personal mythology.

He produced a diverse range of work: performances, paintings, drawings and collages, and they interpreted the 'subjective' in different ways. Some works dealt specifically with the situation in England in the atmosphere of deepening economic and social decay. *Boys of England* is a collage book of newspaper clippings, whose whole accumulated effect gives an impression of a feverish, youthful skinhead energy misdirected into bizarre exploits of aggression and violence (its form of simple accumulation also draws attention to the way in which the right-wing British press orchestrates such material to terrorize its readers and to spread fear). One of these newspaper stories — about a boy who roamed the streets, throwing ammonia in the eyes of his victims before attacking them with a dagger and robbing them — formed the basis of a series of poem-paintings called *Rhapsody of the Dagger and Ammonia Boy*. David described these paintings as 'in the Hogarthian tradition'. They are episodic, but in a synchronous, rather than narrative, mode. The London of fish and chip shops, take-aways, flea-pits, backyards full of junk, army-surplus stores and boarded-up terraces is evoked in a sequence of miniature scenes in two long paintings:

Armed with ammonia bottle and a dagger
I stalk the streets of Kennington
A stalk of sorrow in a dismal town
A sullen dancer with an angry frown.

The Ammonia Boy himself is portrayed as a figure of health and vigour, even if all around him is in decay, and the childlike style of the painting seems to represent also the persona of the boy, as if the artist was reaching for some hidden tenderness or desperate search for happiness. Belief in the potentiality of youth is mixed with pessimism, sympathy with fear of racist attack (David actually had to leave his squat in Lambeth because of abuse and threats from quite young children encouraged by racist parents). He was drawing as close as he could to a new generation, which the media had labelled 'Europes dead-end kids' as glibly as they had labelled the generation before 'the Flower Children'.

If in this series he linked himself with contemporary youth in his immediate environment, in other projects he began to evoke figures of the past. Other artists' work, and the examples and lives of others, have always been enormously important for David. He has often presented his work in the form of a homage. Now, he began to develop this relationship consciously and much more elaborately to entwine his own experiences in the present with what he knew, and also imagined, of the lives of particular people of the past. He seemed to want to gain a new understanding of what an artist is, and what an artist does — not in the abstract, but in intimate relation with the possibilities and limitations of life at particular moments of history, and in relation to the 'nurturing' effects of particular cultures. Setting himself a goal of physical mobility, despite his minimal financial resources, and determined to experience for himself, through actual people and places, the reality of different cultures, he began to wander over Europe. Most of 1980 he stayed in Rome and Venice, exploring every corner of those cities, their vast aggregate of art works, their intricate juxtapositions of present and past. The art form he has used for these experiences has been, mainly, his own conception of performance.

SYNOPTIC REALISM

David has danced and done performances since a very young artist in Manila, so the growth of Performance Art in Britain during the 1970s did not fundamentally affect him.

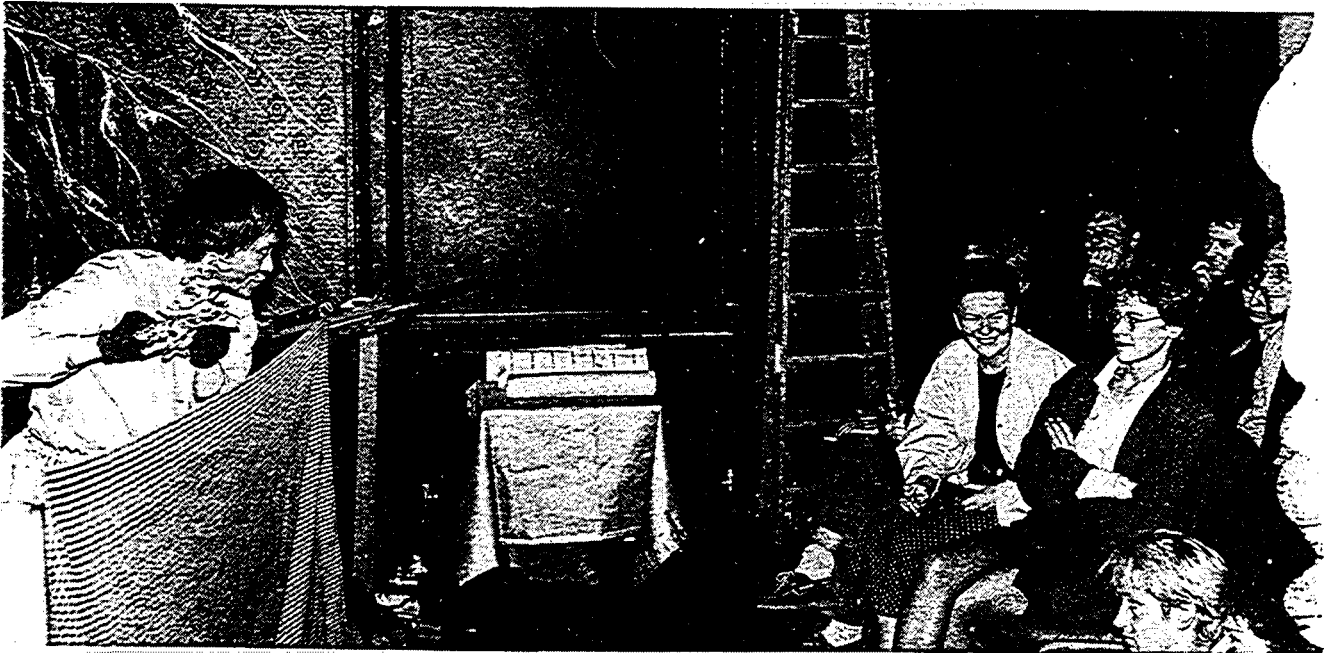
In 1980 and 1981, David gave a large number of performances in different parts of Europe, although he had no studio, very few possessions and very little funds. In performance he found a vehicle through which he could combine many elements of his artistic self: his taste for autobiography, his pedagogy, his enormously wide culture, his charisma, his liking for working with others and for quick feedback, and especially his copious re-inventions of the collage aesthetic.

In another sense, his performances are a logical development out of his earlier objects, and have a conscious and sophisticated rationale. Essentially ephemeral in themselves, his objects have always aimed to signify processes. If in the Kinetic works, the idea of process was embodied in a metaphor of physical or biological nature, in the Performances it is human social life which is explored in terms of process. The element of time and space which in the Kinetic works is given through the analogy of a growing and decaying organism, in the Performances becomes a network involving history, language, myth, culture and psychology — the mental worlds in which human beings live. In this vision of the coming into being and decaying of things, the whole point is to avoid linear images of time and space and simple unitary ideas of causation.

Apparently, David has reversed the trend of his immediate preceding 'participation' works. According to the latter concept, his own wishes counted for little in what was produced; whereas Performance appears to be a form where all attention is concentrated on the artist as a unique personality. But although they appear as opposite poles, I believe that the two forms are connected. Both dispute the frozen and static art object as the manifestation of art. Both bring forward creativity as a kind of living question between artist and audience, in a direct use of materials, space and time. In David's case, though, these two forms do have, on one level, a very interesting difference in purpose. Whereas the participation pieces could be said to have concentrated on the creativity which is present in everybody, the Performances concentrate on another and equally true fact: the problem of greatness, the exceptional imagination.

David's way of presenting this has been paradoxical and laced with ironic humour. For one thing, the historical figures he has concentrated on have been quite varied. Most have been artists (for example Leonardo, Tatlin, Malevich, Mondrian, Piranesi or Mozart). But there have also been figures like Magellan, Giordano Bruno, Marie Curie, Alexander the Great, Casanova, and Beau Brummell. He was drawn to each for a particular reason: Magellan (in the performance he made jointly with Oriol de Quadras) because his Circumnavigation of the World (1519-22) represented "the moment when humanity, or one section of humanity, developed a universal concept, (when people discovered empirically, after the voyage, the relativity of space and time)". Beside Magellan's achievement, Brummell's passion for a perfectly-tied cravat might appear trivial:

Medalla performing *The Heist Man Cometh*, first in the series *A Shot In The Dark*, by David Medalla and Brian Morgan. Finborough Theatre, Earls Court, London, 1987. (Photo: Guy Brett)



It's very easy to condemn the dandy as a useless human being, but I think that dandyism...is one of the expressions of man's dream of freedom, at a time when the cities were beginning to grow under the impact of the industrial revolution...an illusion perhapsbut every manifestation of this dream in world history interests me.¹⁷

17 David Medalla,
*Bonjour Bo, Bonsoir
Brummel/Bongo Bo,
Bonsai Brahma,*
performance
programme, Galeries
d'Art Contemporain
du Musées de Nice,
1980.

For another thing, David's method is the opposite of the studied detachment of the academic historian. He is obsessed by the relation of the exceptional to the everyday, to the mundane details and necessities of life. This is one way in which he collapses the linear order of time. In reflecting on figures of the past in live performance, he mixes in details of problems and events in the world, with incidents of his own life. The performance is often prefaced by scenes showing the process by which he and the other performer(s) became interested in the personage and set about studying them. It can be disconcerting, but it also has the ring of truth. The past can only be projected through actual people living today, and is part of our daily lives.

Performance is usually not a narrative but an evocative form. Most of David's performances have elaborate structures, with stories-within-stories, slide-shows, taped music, impromptu 'discourses', and so on. I'm never quite sure if I'm seeing the whole of one performance, or a part of something larger, or where the piece really begins or ends. The presentation is usually extremely nonchalant. Nevertheless, I'm aware of a great outpouring of ideas, rough, improvised, 'provisional' but giving one a great deal to think about and motivating one's own creative drive. Instead of treating one performance in detail, I would like to describe some of the ways in which he has extended his recurring idea of metaphor:

1. Use of live performance to 'defamiliarize'. This is the 'naive' element which finds a way of looking at things freshly. In some form, it is part of all his performances, but was particularly well seen in an early one, arranged at short notice and in improvisatory fashion at the Serpentine Gallery, London, in 1975. It was David's response to a long list of questions which the Paris-based Argentinian artist, Lea Lublin, was asking of all the visitors as part of a video-investigation piece, and which was summed up in her title: *Is Art an Enigma?* Taking the painting of Vermeer, a group of artist-friends enacted the figures in Vermeer's famous compositions, while David, drawing aside a heavy curtain to reveal each tableau, recited a little novella he had written, which related the particular compositions to the economic and political conditions of the time. As the verbal description of Vermeer's 'ensemble of social relations' made him appear a living figure again, circumscribed, one of the Dutch population, so the living figures of the actors made poignant the persistent appeal through time of the contrivance and artifice of a great artist.

2. Moving backwards and forwards across time. One example: in a performance called *The First Mirror in China* (based on a Taoist story), 'the Prince of Chou exiled in the Northwestern part of Cathay to supervise the building of the Great Wall, pining for his love, picks up fragments of dead flowers, torn pieces of cloth and papers blown by the winds of the Gobi desert — one of these fragments is a newspaper clipping (from *Le Monde*) about a Council of Europe report on the existence of ten million poor people in Western Europe today'. Past and present are freely mixed up, as happens in dreams. But the effect is not confusing; one gradually comes to realise that it is the mechanical motions of linear time which are confusing and which leave one with a feeling of helplessness. In reality, historical figures are actors in the

present as much as living people are actors in the past.

3. Concretization of ideas by means of objects. At the time of making *Eskimo Carver*, David had planned a performance in which he would take seven knives to stand for the principal periods of human history:

The paleolithic knife — one of the first tools, hunting
 The Aztec ritual knife — slave society
 The scythe — agricultural, feudal society
 Leonardo da Vinci's scalpel for cutting the cadaver — Renaissance
 The cutlass — knife of piracy, European expansion into Third World
 The manufactured knife, the hundred-bladed penknife — industrial division of labour
 The common knife of today which cuts tomatoes, onions, potatoes, cabbages, radishes....¹⁸

18 See David Medalla, interview with Steve Thorne, op. cit.

His performances teem with objects used in this metaphorical way. It is a direct extension of attitudes towards the 'found object' of the *Galaxy* period and participation-production pieces, except that, very often in the performances, objects are used specifically as a concise and witty way of pin-pointing certain social realities. For this reason, they do not function as props do in theatres. They are not background, atmosphere or protagonist, but like works in themselves and part of a 'living collage'. In *Magellan*, for example, to dramatise the modern world of passports, national frontiers and immigration controls, which was being used in ironic 'abstract' counterpoint to the difficulties of Magellan's period, the performers ended by tipping out a huge collection of old rubber stamps on to a table (the sort of material you might find in skips around the legal areas of London's Lincoln's Inn and Grays Inn Road). They stamped each other's bodies until they became like the tattooed 'savages' of pre-twentieth century western imagination.

But found objects too can have a purely sensuous role, as when David peels off layers and layers of cheap frocks, tulle scarves, jumble-sale jackets, pyjama trousers, and hats to create a gorgeous tropicalism of colour.

He never seems to run out of inversions and incongruities: alluding to a 'great project' via some kitsch derivative — a Mondrian napkin, a Michaelangelo key-ring — or to nitty-gritty realities via masterpieces of art. "I sort of meshed historical figures in with daily experiences. I work in a very peculiar way. I let one image, one sensation, reverberate into another."¹⁹

David sometimes shows a close involvement with the objects used in his performances by pretending to cook them and eat them, or actually doing so. This serves to relate the most grandiose ideas to two basic necessities: food and shelter. In *Magellan*, David and Oriel tore up and ate pieces of a world map. Also, a great deal of attention was given to the sufferings of Magellan and his crew because, despite their great care in laying in special provisions, they did not realise that oranges and lemons, so commonplace at home as to be invisible, could have saved them from disease and death. *Piranesi and the Mother/scorpion* centres around Piranesi's dream of cooking and eating a scorpion to assuage his hunger while sketching in the ruins of Rome. At one point, in *Tatlin at the Funeral of Malevich*, David, as Tatlin, eats a fish, which becomes the focal point of insight into the work and fate of these two artists of the Russian Revolution. In nearly every performance, David imagines intensely and identifies himself with the hardships of a historical figure who has undertaken an exceptional project.

4. Relations between two people. Another interesting dimension of David's

19 David Medalla, interview with David Hirsh, New York 1989 (unpublished).



David Medalla and Brian Morgan, impromptu in the Indian Trophy Room, Sandhurst Military Academy, 1988. (Photo: Guy Brett)

performance is that all their references, to this or that historical figure, or epoch of art, can be seen as simply an aspect of the relationship between the actual people (usually two people: David and a young male collaborator) who are making the performance. The theme emerges from their dialogue, their friendship, their "reciprocal didactics" (to borrow the title of one performance cycle Medalla produced with Oriol de Quadras). The theme is carried over directly into many of David's recent paintings -viz. his Parables of Friendship series — where interestingly, objects enter again copiously as indicators of people's lives and mental worlds: 'still lives' which are a typical mixture of the mundane and the *récherché*.

All his paintings, performances and collages of the last few years are examples, Medalla says, of what he calls Synoptic Realism. Reality — realism: what is the relation between them? The twentieth century up to now has offered an extremely rich and complicated answer: reality is entwined with the languages and models that we use to describe it. Any artist today who sets out to synthesize, not only the facets of reality, but also the 'realisms', the methods, atomized among the earlier artists, is setting themselves an ambitious task, to say the least. David Medalla has described the complexities involved at just one level: that of optical reality.

Medalla considers optical reality, out to its fringes in paravisual phenomena, as one component of Synoptic Realism. There are also the levels of: 'dreams, of subjective sensations, volitions, desires, aspirations, memories', the mental worlds of specific human beings with their criss-crossing fragments of history, culture, myth and language; partly determined by their origins and partly modified by their experiences and tastes. The fragmentariness of our experience of reality today is matched by that of artistic language. Given the shrinking of the world and the constant movement of visual information (ranging from reproductions of the 'high' and 'popular' art of different nations down to every kind of technical, entertainment and commercial imagery), artistic language is no longer 'homogenous and uni-traditional, but a complex amalgam of so many styles and tendencies'.²⁰ To attempt to unify all this is an epic ambition which really requires an epic art form.

David would see his performances, paintings and 'impromptus' as linked exploratory forms for moving towards a 'synoptic realism'. His work has always had a dual nature: on the one hand a broad kind on social activism, on the other an extraordinary dedication to art, a kind of 24 hour-a-day passion, which refuses to reduce art to any other discourse. He himself would probably refer to the relationship between art and life in terms of enigma:

I don't believe in moralistic art. Art should investigate reality and bring out its enigmas..

I mean I'm an enigma to myself...I don't know why I'm here. You can always have a construct: I'm here to pay taxes, to please my parents, to have children. Thomas Aquinas said the animals were here in order to praise God. You see, the constructs are always changing....²¹

20 David Medalla,
interview, South Hill
Park Bulletin, Bracknell
1983.

21 David Medalla,
informal talk with
students, Chelsea
School of Art, April
1983.