



The Locus+ Archive

Charlie Hooker

Mainbeam, 1983

A text for the publication *This Will Not Happen Without You, 2007*

Charlie Hooker

'They filmed Get Carter there...' was Ken Gill and Jon Bewley's parting shot to encourage me to devise a new performance installation, sited in the Gateshead multi-storey car park, in 1983. The piece, entitled MAINBEAM (A Ballet for Vehicles) was set in the upper levels of the car park at night and involved four dark cars, each with a driver and co-driver and specially-prepared soundtrack emanating from their in-car stereos, together with four pedestrians, dressed in black, brandishing aggressive-sounding metal percussion instruments. This was all choreographed through the use of CB radio, with both cars and pedestrians moving toward and away from the audience and gradually, menacingly, hemming it in.

I have made a number of works in and around Newcastle, with three linked specifically to Locus+ and its former incarnations as Projects UK and The Basement Group: *Percussion Walk* (1979); *Move In* (1981) and MAINBEAM (1983). Each piece, although carried out on a shoestring budget, was incredibly well organised by the group and well received by the public.

Conceptually, MAINBEAM dealt with shifting the psychological and physical barrier between audience and performer. I was very interested in skewing, for the viewer, what was real or pretend. In *Move In*, I had done this by creating a 'caged-in' luminous performance area which, when the space was plunged into total darkness, allowing only the luminous drawing and certain markings on each performer to be visible, altered the viewer's psychological perception of the space and its scale and brought into question who was in fact caged in, the viewer or the performer. In MAINBEAM, the idea was to take an audience to an extremely threatening and austere location, create a performance and push this to a level where as a viewer each person began to question at what point performance ended and reality began.

Gateshead's multi-storey car park had been, the locals felt, a huge white elephant. It was hardly ever used by anybody to park their cars as they could all easily park for free in the surrounding streets. A restaurant had been installed on the top level of this austere, badly-lit structure – its one claim to fame was that it had been from its balcony that one of the characters in *Get Carter* is flung to his death. As part of a series of events in which The Basement Group had asked artists to create works for public spaces, I was invited to visit the space and see if I felt able to use it.

I remember seeing it from the train as I approached The Tyne: an oppressive grey monolith – very hard-looking but nevertheless structurally interesting with, as I discovered, an extremely 'live', harsh acoustic. I went along with a tape measure, camera and notebook and began climbing the levels. It was basically deserted, drab and cold, with the wind blowing in off the river. The only people I bumped into were some kids sniffing glue. I carried on up and on each level saw one burnt-out car after another.

Clearly, this was a not a good place to be – highly charged and atmospheric but, in performance terms, extremely difficult to control. However, I liked the idea of exploring its socio-political references and, as the construction of a multi-storey car park is basically a helix, was interested to see if it would be possible to create a soundwork involving sounds which spiraled around the building. The team swung into action, liaised with the local council and police and the project formally began.

Most of the preparatory meetings for all projects seemed to revolve around the pub. These alcohol-fuelled gatherings were a brilliant way of ensuring that all participants were fired up and enthusiastic about collaborating on each event. The meeting for MAINBEAM was particularly memorable. To help everybody who was involved in the collaboration understand the basic principles and logistics regarding the work, we decided to take over the back room of an old pub. My performances have always involved the participation of local people and, as in 1983 really had mobile phones and it was important to be able to communicate between each car during the performance, I had asked The Basement Group to enlist the help of Citizens' Band radio enthusiasts with 'walkie-talkies' to drive the cars and co-ordinate their choreographed movements. So, in the back room, the 'performance artist from London' walked in off the train to explain 'the job' and was met by enthusiastic group members who mediated between myself and a set of slightly perplexed, poker-faced Geordie CB radio enthusiasts. Diagrams and plans were produced and, as the beer began to flow, the parallels between MAINBEAM and Get Carter fully established.

During the rehearsal period of any performance, there is always one difficult, seemingly insoluble, problem to address. In MAINBEAM, this happened the night before the public performance. One of the drivers, a slightly unreliable character with one tooth, had failed to turn up. We needed both him and his car to help perfect some specific manoeuvres and as he was absent the rehearsal was going badly and some of the CB club were losing faith in the project. It was a very quiet, still night and as we were discussing what to do we heard a siren in the far distance. The siren slowly came closer and then began spiralling up and around the multi-storey building. It became louder and louder until, with a screech and headlights full on, around the bend came the missing driver. He stopped, leapt out of the car and in broad Geordie grinned at me and said: 'Is this the type of thing you're after then, Petal?' This galvanised the team; everybody began to understand the three-dimensional nature of the sounds and movements that I had envisaged and things began to improve rapidly.

Although *Move In* was in my opinion a conceptually stronger piece (the forerunner to *Behind Bars*, performed at the Tate by various original Basement Group members in 1981), MAINBEAM received greater media coverage. It achieved its objective of taking work outside of the gallery and including the general public in a thought-provoking event of which they, either from the CB enthusiasts' perspective or that of the audience, were a physical part.

If I were to sum up my feelings about the projects I was involved in with the group, the overriding impression would be that, although everything was done primarily for 'the crack', with very little money, no event or performance ever felt amateur. There was always a great deal of commitment, attention to detail and determination to help achieve what any invited artist had envisaged. When approached to submit some work for this archive exhibition, I suggested recreating a one-off performance in Newcastle of MAINBEAM or *Move In* to complement the documentation and celebrate The Basement Group's achievements. It was felt that there was not adequate time or money to achieve a satisfactory result. Things would have been different in 1983, Petals .