

Ron Haselden

By **David Lillington**

1. Introduction

I always think of myself as a sculptor. It all hangs on sculpture. Some of it is temporary.'

He is an artist using hard materials - from scaffolding to film-projectors - but soft media: light, sound, movement and time. Wind and water have featured as elements in a number of pieces, and even air pressure. Roughly speaking, his method, which captures an attitude, is to set something up from which, through which, something can flow. He uses a mixture of technology and people. The technology can be high-tech or low-tech, but the inclination is towards the latter, since he is interested more in the flow of natural forces than in the hardware.

'The material is chosen for its literalness and used straightforwardly - with all the bones and innards exposed... Haselden's work is characterised by this materiality, a way of working which has its most immediate roots in the 1960s - Minimalism, Conceptual and Process art - the aesthetics of silence.' (Hilary Gresty)

Moreover, Haselden loves to work collaboratively - with 'architects, dance companies, sound artists, computer or electronic design experts.'

One can see in his work a feeling for nature. Haselden lives in France, in Brizard, a village near Dinar, Brittany. It's rural. That's important. His attitude to his work is reflected in his attitude to his life as an artist:

'I've never been a commercial gallery animal, and if something's successful I want to leave it and move on.'

He tells the story that as a child he once tried to run away to sea.

2. Film

From 1971 Haselden experimented extensively with film.

However he should not be considered so much a film-maker as an artist - a sculptor or an installation artist - using film as a medium.

'He is not a film-maker in the sense that one would immediately think of, but much more somebody who was using film in a curious, intuitive, physical way to create environments or to make installations.' (Stuart Brisley)

Haseldens fascination with the ephemeral explains in part his interest in film. Much of the film had a feeling of transience, and some of it was designed to be temporary. Haselden:

'At the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s a lot of sculptors turned to film, many of them making loops.'

The film work has a performance aspect, and may include live performers, or the live figure. A film piece may be rephotographed during a showing, the results being incorporated in subsequent showings.

3. Expanded Film

In the early 70s Haselden had been making film projects with titles such as Overhead Floor Dance, Photoelectric Cell and Environmental Cycle.

The first of these, an early film project (1972) is described thus:

'2 screen. 4 mins. 16mm. A still and a cine camera record a series of configurations by a group of dancers. A central figure revolves at a higher level while drift and expand patterns are explored by the other dancers relating to the screen edge. The still camera records time exposures, while the cine records the motion. One screen cuts across to the other.'

Railway Trolley is described by Haselden as 'a continuously evolving piece that is never performed in the same way twice'. This is achieved by the use of a live figure in each performance, and by rephotographing. It used four projectors and 'the time structure is based on a drawing of a railway trolley'. The piece is significant, and typical of Haselden in achieving a synthesis between still photographs and film.

In speaking of his own work, Haselden favours the term 'film structures'. It was an expression of a wider 'structuralist' practice, and put the emphasis on the events of film-making and film-projection themselves and on other formal aspects of film. The approach was much talked about at the time, and in particular the idea that audiences were not to be passive but to take part in the presentation of film. Of particular significance was the Festival of Expanded Cinema at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1976.

In the ICA show Haseldens pieces were MFV 'Maureen' Fishing out of Eyemouth and Lady Dog. MFV Maureen was made in 1975, and reshown in 2002. Six screens show footage - key imagery is of a fisherman working with a net line. Since the film loops are of differing lengths, the sequence keeps changing. Also Haselden rephotographed the screens for subsequent presentations, so that the piece as a whole changes. MFV Maureen also connects us with another aspect of Haseldens work, being one of the first examples of his abiding interest in boats, rivers and the sea. The piece also marked a slight shift in his work in that the nature of the collaboration was different from that of previous works, making the piece more of a gallery show. One sees here time as an element of nature, and we are reminded that 'conceptual' art originally had both a cerebral aspect and a nature aspect. Lady Dog (1976) 'records the actions of a dog and a naked woman in my living room'. They were shot from above, and the results reduced to a sequence of stills, so that the piece is 'part static and part animated'. (Haselden in the ICA Festival of Expanded Cinema catalogue).

This was one of a series of 'expanded' cinema events. Again, it is not so much a case of pieces as of series of overlapping and interlocking events. Haselden showed Lady Dog and Providence Trawling at the Arnolfini in 1976 and Sticks for the Dog at the ACME gallery in the same year. He also showed with other artists in a range of shows which included expanded work, including 'Inglese Arte Oggi' in Milan in 1976, and at the London Film Makers Co-op, an organisation with which many of the filmmakers working in this way were involved.

4. Installation Indoors

Haselden is perhaps most well-known for his use of flashing lights as a medium. One of his most beautiful installations was *Coliseum I* (1989).

This could only be seen at night through the windows of the Showroom Gallery in Bethnal Green. It was a light piece, including three large upright circles of lights which 'appeared to spin and also to run back and forth through the space.' A message posted through the door one night read

'Dear Mr. Light Fantastic, please do more of these, they warm us up on our winter evenings.'

One should note that lights in Haselden's work always, in some sense, move, and it is this movement, as much as the light itself, which is important. Other kinds of movement have also been important. To give one example, another successful piece was *Working 12 Days* (ACME Gallery, 1978).

This 'was a lifeboat I chainsawed up. It had a motor attached to it, so that it vibrated. It was quite claustrophobic in the gallery.'

The kinetic possibilities of sculpture were also explored in other ways: some pieces involved the use of machinery, of a turning axle or spindle. In, for example, *Syracuse Elm* (filmed by David Hilton) there was a large turning spindle to which the branch of a tree was attached. The branch was also attached to walls and ceiling with bandage-like cloth ligaments. The progressive attachment of these and the resultant movement constituted the piece.

However, there is another way of looking at the movement, and the concentration on the ephemeral in Haselden's work. These fluid elements are often a counterbalance to a particular kind of weight and solidity. *Graving Dock* (1981) consisted of dense scaffolding inside the ACME Gallery, filling the gallery. The solidity of the piece was offset by a more transient, natural, element: Haselden plumbed in a spray of water, creating dripping and flooding in the gallery, as if to bring an aspect of life and time to the still structure. The water also had the effect of making this indoor piece resemble an outdoor one. Haselden's longstanding interest in water - rivers, the sea, boats - may be invoked here, and *Graving Dock* was based on drawings of the graving docks of shipyards.

Another aspect of the 'fluidity' of Haselden's working methods is his predilection for collaborative work. *Entre Nuit et Jour* (1992) was made in collaboration with musician and sound artist Peter Cusack. It was a 'triptych': a three-part light work with sheets of metal laid on the floor under which were flashing lights - a different colour for each part - and matched up with sound recordings of nightingales, bees, and owls: each part of the piece representing a different time of day or night. *Frère Jacques* was another collaborative piece with Peter Cusack, and it represents Haselden's methods well. It was collaborative, interactive, and layered in time. Its chief elements were sound and light. Its subject was people. A 'curtain' of lights, and the sound of local children singing 'Frère Jacques', were

both activated by the presence of the viewer. And the more viewers there were in the space, the more children sang.

Haselden's work with choreographers has been another aspect of his collaborative work. Notable was a collaboration with Rosemary Butcher on *After the Crying and the Shouting* (ICA London, 1989). This was a light piece as set design. Later, in 1992-93 he worked with her on 'Wasps'. His work with architects and on architectural sites also involves various kinds of collaborative mindset. A simple, one might say 'classical' Haselden 'architectural' piece is that made for the walls of the passageway between the Imax cinema near Waterloo and the South Bank in London. *Blue Passage* (1999) consists of 8000 blue LEDs sunk into holes in the walls of the underground walkway.

5. Installation Outdoors

It may be useful to think of Haseldens installation under two aspects: the work with an emphasis on physicality - which for the most part means the scaffolding pieces - and the work which is more obviously about the ephemeral (light, sound etc.).

However, even the most physical pieces are also concerned with time, change, and have usually been linked with water or other inconstant, fluid elements.

Haselden has made a number of pieces using scaffolding. *Belvedere* (Believer Forest, Dartmoor, 1987) was a 70 foot high spiral scaffolding structure. Inspiration for this piece came partly from Albrecht Durers painting of the Tower of Babel, with which Haselden had an enduring fascination.

'From the top of Belvedere you could see over the trees, and people far away could see you. Other scaffolding pieces include Seaham Harbour, Tower of Babel and Thames Project.'

Fête (1989-90). One of Haseldens most celebrated pieces: a fairground-style installation of flashing lights strung tent-fashion on poles, along with sound, as of hurdy-gurdys, and somewhat broken: 'the rhythm of the fairground carousel, the honky tonk of the accordion' (Hilary Gresty). This large outdoor piece toured in Europe.

Fête embraced the notion of outdoor spectacle, and demonstrated an understanding of an artworks intimate connectness to a physical context, to place. In this sense it could be linked to the way in which Haselden has worked extensively with architects and architecture, and to a piece such as *Trilogy Part 1* (part of *Breathing in, Breathing out*), in Trellick Tower in Notting Hill, made with architect Robert Barnes. Haselden has spoken about Islamic art in relation to his architectural installations (in *Art and Architecture* magazine, No. 53, 1999, article by Hugh Stoddart) this is helpful in resolving the question of whether his work is or is not 'decorative': Islamic art has traditionally been intimately integrated with architecture, and has a notion of decoration quite different, and more serious, than the usual European one. Jonathan Harvey has written of 'Haseldens ability to maximise the the potential of a site.' (*Thames Project* catalogue, 1981). With *Trilogy Part 1* Haselden has suggested that he was working with people as a material. Residents were

given lights which were plugged in in their flats and when cued each lit their light, creating a light performance which could be seen from outside the tower block.

6. Installation Outdoors

Trilogy Part 2 and Trilogy Part 3 are the as yet unrealised follow-ons to Trilogy Part 1, the Trellick Tower performance.

Part 2 would be in a lift shaft, and would probably be a year-long installation Part 3 would be in a building opposite the Trellick Tower, and would change colour when trains went by. It would be permanent, if possible. Things are only permanent if people love it. That's the nature of my work: it survives by peoples will. Travel Book consists of images of light sculptures by Haselden alongside text by Jean-Marc Huitorel The eight sculptures are in five English towns and cities: Newcastle, Sunderland, Middlesbrough, Durham, Blackpool and London. The book will not review the art but review the experience of the places

Also current is Visitors Book at the New Millennium Centre, Durham. A set of electronic surfaces in boxes on the wall on which people are asked to sign their names. On the display boxes the archive builds up and each signature dissolves into the next. Haselden likes this piece: its small and intimate. He worked with Neil Urquhart and Reading Universitys Department of Cybernetics to realise it.

Visitors Book reflects current concerns: he is now working more and more on digital media, and in recent years Haselden has returned to the moving image and made numerous short video films. Brighton Beach is a short film mixing a Russian pop song sound track with the atmosphere of an English sea front in winter fog. Snow shows buildings in New York in snow; its a film about the relation of distance and light, and thus not just light but density or lightness of atmosphere. Earth is Haseldens homage to Walter de Marias New York Earth Room, a film of earth which then slowly reveals the site of de Marias piece. Additionally, Haselden has also made films featuring nature pure, including films of flowers and Haseldens short films are soon to be broadcast on Television in France.

As Hugh Stoddart has written, permanence holds no great appeal for him. Haselden: 'In much of the work I do not envisage the piece ever reaching a final form, what is crucial is the process of experimenting and extending ideas into whatever area they have to do.' He has in one sense always been a connoisseur of the elemental, the raw: light, sound, water; and where solid materials are used, these include scaffolding, trees, buildings. But the forces which move through these things are what interest him, and it is for this reason that his working methods have always been continually changing and why any work he embarks on is itself subject to continual flux.

David Lillington