

It is a pleasure to participate in the celebration of this landmark anniversary of the National Review of Live Art and its creative force, Nikki Milican. Both continue to go from strength to strength, rightly garnering testimonials from around the world. It is many years since memories of the Midland Group, the NRLA's place of birth, have been expunged from the collective memories of the local authority and arts bureaucrats who came close to destroying its one, lasting artistic legacy.

I was the last Director of the centre and arrived to find an organisation with crumbling or unfinished facilities and technically insolvent: the monthly crawl to the bank to plead for loans to pay that month's wages became a familiar routine. "If the lottery had come a few years earlier" is a daydream I still occasionally entertain.

"If that part of the city had blossomed just a little more quickly into the entertainment hub it is now.. "

"If those funding the centre had taken the role of creative stakeholders, rather than willing vultures, who projected unrealistic visions upon its carcass... "

Happily, that period of The Midland Group need not be written as unfulfilled conjecture. For all the financial shortcomings, there was within those walls an authentic creative movement. I never left a performance without feeling exhilarated, moved and occasionally, infuriated: disinterest was never an option. In my short tenure, Nikki was able to explore ways of bringing the live art genre and its community to a wider world. My small role was to share her ambition.

In that period, the NRLA title emerged, reflecting a desire to bring live art to a wider audience and offer the Midland Group a role on the national art's stage. A foray was made to Edinburgh with a package of artists, showcasing the new and the best, amongst them *Rose English*, *Manact*, *Anne Seagrave* and an early iteration of *Theatre De Complicite*. The reward for the latter was the Perrier Award and for the whole, a real increase in awareness. A further showcase went to the ICA and with a network of Platform activity around the country, giving live art a national future, nurtured and supported by the Midland Group, seemed tantalisingly close..

Back home in Nottingham the triumph was not shared by the funders whose response veered between bewilderment and an anger best attributed to jealousy. The financial demise of the Midland Group was not long in coming, hastened by those interests who saw an opportunity to take control. In the end, it was the commercial and administrative shortcomings that hastened its end – there was an ignominious period where it transpired that the losses would have been less in the “craft” shop if the goods had been given away, rather than sold.

Much is written about the arts movements of the past, generally with the wisdom of hindsight and to fit a current orthodoxy. The history of arts centres in particular makes much of the gains through the interaction of different artforms. In practice, few are more than the sum of the parts. Live art is a critical exception and the fine art tradition of the Midland Group offered an important context. Ultimately, the building and “funders”, better suited as pallbearers for the arts rather its guardians, killed an artistic movement that had been the city’s for decades. But the death of the building could not put out a spark that had become a flame and Nottingham’s loss saw others, most notably Glasgow’s, gain.

I still live in Nottinghamshire and I have never been able to walk past the former Midland Group building without a sense of real sadness. Of the people who now populate the trendy shops of the area, many will not have been alive in that era. Putting a blue plaque on the wall of the old building would be a waste, but maintaining and celebrating the spirit of what started there seems an entirely fitting task.