

THE VIRTUOUS BUREAUCRATS

OR

How live art came to Nottingham

In 1979 Nottingham's Midland Group Arts Centre, *né* the Midland Group Gallery, was on the verge of bankruptcy.

Its move from a fairly poky, terraced house opposite the Playhouse to an expensively transformed Victorian warehouse or factory in the city's Lace Market was going badly wrong. The idea had been that new premises would enable what had been an art gallery to develop into an arts centre with the visual arts at its core (rather than the usual focus in multi-purpose venues on live drama). However, the estimated cost of an ambitious re-build and fitting-out, including an open-air sculpture court carved out of the centre of the building, had been greatly exceeded. The staff, working in ludicrously appalling conditions (a large hole in the roof above their offices on the top floor was for a time only covered by a tarpaulin), were loyal but simultaneously mutinous.

There was no money to go forward, and no chance of going back. In effect, the organization was immobilized, and the Arts Council, unsurprisingly, was meditating whether or not to abandon hope and withdraw its substantial annual grant. But it knew this would be a tragedy.

The Midland Group of Artists was founded in 1943 by the distinguished painter Evelyn Gibbs (her husband, Hugh Willatt, was a local solicitor, and eventually became Secretary-General of the Arts Council of Great Britain, retiring in 1975 before these troubles). It presented very fine and well-noticed shows of its members' works. By the 1960s, under its director, Sylvia Cooper, the Midland Group had institutionalized itself, and grown into a nationally important art gallery, which presented avant-garde work and showed an interest in aspects of performance.

Now, an incautious and over-ambitious development threatened to put an end to everything that had been achieved.

The Art Department of the Arts Council, under its director, Joanna Drew, decided to give the organization one more chance. The grant was maintained, Sylvia left and a new director, myself, was appointed. Very little time was left to stabilize the organization and renew its *raison d'être*. Somehow with huge debts and an impoverished bank balance, the Midland Group had (to mix metaphors) to maintain its grip on the cutting edge.

At this point, chance played a high card. I happened to a member of the Arts Council's Special Applications Committee, which funded work which did not sit easily inside conventional art-form categories - music, dance and so forth. The experience of sitting on the committee made me an enthusiast for what was then called performance art. I recall a bureaucratically epiphanic moment. We were considering an application by the well-known artist, Bruce Lacey. He was preparing a project, which he called The Bury St Edmund's Zodiac. If my memory is correct, this entailed him and a group of family and friends conducting a ceremonial and celebratory event in a field outside the Suffolk market town of Bury St Edmunds. Would the public be admitted? we enquired. Certainly

not, returned the answer. The artist had his reasons of which reason knew nothing. We agreed the grant. The Arts Council had a different ethos in those days.

In addition to the Special Applications Committee, the Art Department set aside a small budget in a similar cause, but with a more specialist visual arts emphasis. The money was used to hold performance art 'auditions'. Selected performance artists were paid small sums to present their work before departmental officers and, I think, advisers. Once again, the public was excluded, but this time for mysterious administrative reasons. Perhaps the Arts Council felt that nobody would want to come, so why bother trying to sell tickets?

Performance art, shortly to be re-titled live art, had reached a rich variousness and maturity, but its perceived unmarketability, un-storeability and ephemerality made it less than appealing to the classical avant-gardists who then ran not only the Art Department but much of the art world. Modernism lived and, with it, the role of the museum and state funders like the Arts Council as validators of objects that could be handled - and (in due course) bought or sold by dealers. Obviously an event could not have a persisting value.

Whatever their rationale, the auditions did not contribute much to the cause of creative development and infuriated the artists involved. I smelled an opportunity; or, more precisely, I could see a solution to two problems – first, the Arts Council's embarrassment at having to support directly work in which it had little genuine interest and, secondly, the Midland Group's need to rehabilitate itself by promoting challenging aesthetic practice. I suggested to the Art Department that, if it handed over its annual budget for the Performance Art auditions, the Midland Group would stage the event itself, but this time in public. My proposal was accepted with an alacrity that implied relief.

And so in my brief tenure as director (in 1980 I moved to East Midlands Arts), we presented the first Performance Art Platform. We were lucky to attract the services of the late Steve Rogers as performance director. He left an intoxicating metropolis, where he was working for Bubble Theatre, with some hesitation; but there was nothing uncertain about the sharp-eyed boldness of the programme he assembled.

Steve returned to London in 1983, where, among other things, he managed Marty St James and Anne Wilson and was later appointed editor of the influential Performance Magazine. He was succeeded at the Midland Group by Nikki Milican.

The recovery of the Midland Group did not last. Its financial problems turned out to be systemic and the half-finished premises remained unsatisfactory. The arts centre closed its doors for the last time in 1987, but, like Aeneas escaping the ruins of Troy with the city's symbol, the Palladium, in his hands, Nikki took the Performance Arts Platform with her to Glasgow, where it re-emerged as the National Review of Live Art. In the decades that have followed the National Review has become a national institution.

The story of how live art came to Nottingham deserves a footnote when the cultural history of our times is written, for it is an unusual example of how a purely administrative bargain among bureaucrats, a cynical but virtuous deal, helped to empower a major area of arts practice.