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National Review of Live Art: The 30th Edition

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The 2010 National Review of Live Art (NRLA), which took place between 17 and 21 March in Glasgow, was a doubly significant festival, marking both the NRLA's 30th Anniversary and its final outing – at least under that name. The fact that the NRLA (produced by New Moves International) reached thirty is quite remarkable and deserves celebrating. It survived Thatcher (and New Labour), Section 28, increasingly stringent health and safety practices, brutal arts funding cuts and detrimental freezes. The strongest signal of the NRLA's success is that the decision to drop the name and simply position the work under New Move International's umbrella title, *New Territories*, is entirely on Artistic Director Nikki Milican's terms. The NRLA was, for most of its years, an international festival. It was also one which sought to challenge boundaries between forms, each edition typically including durational work rooted in visual art, such as that made by Black Market International, alongside slickly theatrical performances by companies such as Curious and Uninvited Guests, alongside experimental film, video and sound work. The name, then, had become anachronistic. The festival's philosophy was also to challenge expectations, and one result of generating a 30-year history is that the NRLA had become something of a recognisable trademark. It is likely that Milican's decision to change the festival, on her own terms, will in fact preserve the spirit of the NRLA.

The NRLA's story began in 1979 in Nottingham, where Steve Rogers founded the Performance Platform at the Midland Group. In 1984 Milican became its artistic director naming the 1985 festival 'Eight Days: A Review of Live Art', using the term Live Art for the first time. In 1986, the festival became the National Review of Live Art. Milican has been its artistic director for the duration.

Though the festival emerged in Nottingham, staging annual Performance Platforms there till 1986, the majority of its life, like my own, was spent in Glasgow (aside from two trips it made to London in 1987 and 1993). Recognising the lure and danger of 'origin' or 'conversion' stories, I nevertheless like to peddle one, for I am certain that my first encounter with the NRLA literally changed the direction of my life. In 1989, Dr Brian Singleton, an astute young lecturer, dragged the entire second year of Glasgow University's Theatre Studies Department to the NRLA. I was 18. I had been attending the theatre dutifully but was increasingly struggling to 'suspend my disbelief'. Then I had 'an encounter' (a vision?). This is something of what I wrote, back then:

I went to the Third Eye Centre tonight. A class outing. To see a performance, 'Herbar-ium', by Polish company Scene Plastyczna. I don't know how to describe it... I don't have the words.

The hairs in my neck rose. My breathing quickened. My heart raced. My eyes opened. Adrenaline rushed through me...

Exhilarated.

Breathless.

Alive.

I share this anecdote to make transparent my position, for I have many close ties to the NRLA. That first eye-opening trip was followed by an under-graduate dissertation on performance art, which led to a PhD on live art, and from there to published articles and books, culminating, in 2010, with editing the NRLA's 30th Anniversary Catalogue. I attended the festival in 1989, 1990, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010 (for the record, there were no festivals in 1991, 1992, 1995, 1997 or 1999). It is clear that I am something of an NRLA hag, producing a hagio-graphy.

Though my path has intersected with the NRLA's for 21 years, and I must have seen literally hundreds of performances, attending the NRLA 2010 I found that the hairs on the back of my neck still rose, my breath still quickened, my heart still raced. And I still struggle to find the words. (You really do have to be there.) A few personal moments from the last NRLA, drawn from performances mostly staged at The Arches:

Jürgen Fritz, *Ringing a bell in dialogue with 6 bagpipe players*:

Over the course of an hour, Fritz, wearing a heavy, buttoned-up woollen coat, compels his body to move in sympathy with a handheld bell, to become that bell, to ring. He is accompanied by six bagpipe players, playing in a cycle that leads from one to all, then a sudden, startling silent background for the appeal of the solo peal, followed by the soaring lament of six pipers as they again join in unison, leading back once more to a single pipe and a single bell, and a single body ringing with the sound of effort, of pain and ecstasy, wringing with sweat. The hairs on the back of my neck rise. My eyes begin to water.

Oreet Ashery, *Hairoism*:

Ashery sits astride a plinth. On one wall, four photographs of four men, four public figures: Moshe Dayan, general of the Israeli Defence Forces in the 1950s; Mousa Mo-hammed Abu Marzouk, deputy chairman of the Palestinian Hamas Political Bureau; Avig-dor Liberman, Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister of Israel; and Yassar Arafat (former Palestinian leader)/ Ringo Starr (former Beatles member). Along-side each photo, a tracing of the pattern of each man's hair, including their facial hair. On the plinth, Ashery, her own head shaved, is being transformed, (hair)piece by (hair)piece, into these masculine icons. While I am there, a young male spectator donates a full head of hair for the task and as I watch one of the two male assistants take the clippers to his wavy mop, buzzing it off and transforming him in the process, my own hairs rise on the back of my neck.

Marcia Farquhar, *The Omnibus*:

A thirty-hour piece that over its duration manages to build its own performance history from the intricate web of personal tales spun and respun by Farquhar, the threads of the tales somehow held safely by those sharing the space with her (some, like me, pop in and out, but others have clearly become part of the shifting landscape). The end of the thirty hours is marked by a rousing rendition of the Sex Pistols' God Save the Queen, delivered by spectators standing on our feet – an action, like so many others, that connects to earlier moments in the event (all connected to Farquhar's life). Nothing in the 30 hours is planned. The performance simply unfolds across time, responsive to the people in the room, to Farquhar, to the unfolding itself. This has been a sheer feat of performance. Listening to the spontaneous singing, my eyes widen and water, my skin shifts, my heart pounds.

Boris Nieslony, *A Feather fell down on United Kingdom of Great Britain*:

A black square of cloth on the hard, concrete floor, used to carefully wrap a sheet of paper. A white feather dropped from above, floats down to land gently atop it. A spoken proclamation: 'This performance is dedicated to people killed by capital punishment and human rights injuries incurred by the State; by mass-murder, by ethnic cleansing, by crimes against humanity, by global wars, by civil wars, by massacre, by genocide'. An A-Z roll call of countries follows, each one complicit, each one a site to behold, each one systematically marked by Nieslony breaking a clear sheet of glass against his head, each time discarding the two shards that remain in his hands, a throwaway gesture that is far from throwaway as it is so carefully part of this ritual of witnessing. The bleeding of hands and head is unavoidable but incidental. A feather falls gently and the skin on the back of my neck prickles.

Not all of the performances have this effect, of course. And not all are intended to. Sam Rose's Melting Point is a singular encounter, an intimate whispering in my ear, tasty and smelling of chocolate; Kate Stannard's *R.A.W.* is a piece I pass by and return to, continuously, as I circle through the Arches while she cycles for nearly 860 miles on a static bike (replicating in the NRLA's space the arduously testing Race Across the West); Ian Hinchliffe's *Chubbin' Mondays (or how to nearly escape from senility)*, a seeming homage to fishing, presented at the CCA, that is actually a tender homage to dead friends, hooks and then tugs at my heart strings – a work of carefully structured chaos; Professor Liz Aggiss's *Survival Tactics* has the audience hooting with appreciation, as she offers

astute advice, drawn from her own long years of experience, on how to survive in the live art profession: 'If it can't fit in the bag, don't take it. . . . Never assume you are going to be in a fully functioning theatre. . . . Keep your day job'. And in the furthestmost arch, quietly getting on with their task over two days, Trace Collective shredded the NRLA's paper history of 30 years (*Post-Historical-Cluster-Fuck*), bundling the shreds into clear bags. The entwined, overlapping, messy and incomplete bundles of shredded paper offer a more accurate representation of the festival's history than its reams of one-dimensional paper documents.

The last NRLA proved to be a unique celebration of its long history, a history made present in the artists chosen to appear at it. Everyone performing had performed at other NRLAs – some many years ago (including Marty St James, Roberta M. Graham, Rob La Frenais, Akademia Ruchu, Brittonioni Brothers, Neil Bartlett), some just last year (Michelle Brown, Sophia Yadong Hao), and a few regularly (Robert Ayers, Anne Seagrave, Geraldine Pilgrim, Richard Layzell, Alistair MacLennan). The years and generations and memories crossed and mingled, allowing a long view of the distance covered.

Over the span of three decades, the NRLA grew from a handful of brave audience members to in excess of 500, and from a handful of performances to over 70. These achievements are all the more remarkable when one remembers that 30 years ago the term 'Live Art' was little used. Thirty years ago there was no Live Art Development Agency; no Live Art UK; no Live Art archive; no art or university courses teaching Live Art; no academic books or articles about Live Art; and few festivals of Live Art.

The cultural landscape of and for the form has clearly changed, no doubt influenced by the NRLA itself, which was prepared to take risks, to create space for the uncertain and unknown, and to provide room for artists to experiment with and develop their own forms (Forced Entertainment's first move into durational performance was with *12 AM: Awake and looking down*, at the NRLA in 1993). As so many artists commented in the 30th Anniversary Catalogue, the NRLA provided a place to simply 'be' a performance artist (without having to explain the term or the practice or the point), to be challenged and supported, to engage in discussion and debate (including 'what is live art anyway?'), and to feel part of a community. Though the details of next year's *New Territories* are still to be announced, my hope is that it continues to provide just such a space; whilst the landscape might have changed, the work – whatever you call it – mostly remains necessary.

Dr Deirdre Heddon is a Reader in Theatre Studies at the University of Glasgow. She is author of *Autobiography and Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and co-author of *Devising Performance: A Critical History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). She is currently co-editing with Jennie Klein *Histories and Practices of Live Art in the UK* (Palgrave, 2011). She served on the Board of Directors for New Moves Inter-national, producers of the NRLA, from 2005 to 2010.

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