

Gerry Pilgrim

NRLA

In the late 80s, I was invited by Nikki Milican to sit on a panel at the National Review of Live Art at Riverside Studios to discuss the current state of performance practice. I had been touring for some years with my company Hesitate and Demonstrate Visual Theatre Company in the UK and mainland Europe. During the discussion, a young woman announced that I shouldn't be on the panel as I was from theatre not fine art and did not belong - in fact I was part of the enemy. I remember giving a long sigh of exasperation at this tired old argument. I explained, patiently at first, that I had trained as a fine artist but had then begun to passionately deplore the continuing segregation and prejudice of the artforms which, like constantly warring parents, were in danger of damaging the growth and development of the art practice they purported to support - Performance.

No matter what we are called during different eras – performance artists, time based artists, live artists – I believe each artist works in their own particular way and are often categorised by others, not by themselves. At the National Review of Live Art, I feel I have always been accepted for what I do and the constantly changing landscape of my practice is acknowledged and welcomed. In reflecting on the history of the NRLA, I can only talk about my personal journey in which that festival has been a constant hum, bursting into the forefront at pivotal moments in my own history. I have always been an artist that has never quite fitted in – too theatrical for the fine art world, too fine art for the theatre world. I see myself as a prime example of someone who falls down the crack between the two floorboards of fine art and theatre. I believe this is a really interesting place to be and I'm very happy not to be easily categorised.

(My) History

When I was young I didn't know whether to study theatre or art and at that time there were no interdisciplinary courses so you had to choose. I decided on art school but continued to be involved with my local youth theatre company. After an unhappy foundation at St Martins, where I was the quiet one at the back wearing unfashionable clothes who was being forced to be experimental when I didn't know what the word meant, I took a year out and continued an interest in theatre by going to workshops at the Oval House. The Oval House was a cutting edge arts centre where national and international alternative theatre companies were asked to give workshops to young people alongside their performances in the theatre.

In Cork Street one day, I saw a painting by Frances Bacon. I went into the gallery and felt that I could walk into the environments he had created. I decided to go back to art school. I received a charity grant and did a second foundation year at City and Guilds in Kennington. It was a traditional art school with figure drawing and etching in an old house where I was allowed to become experimental in my own time. By the time I applied to do my degree at Leeds Art School - then known as the Bauhaus of the UK, I was accepted.

On my first day two events happened that changed my life; I was asked by a tutor if I liked theatre and art and if I knew that I had come to the place where I could do both and it was called Performance Art. He told me to read *On the Art of Theatre* by Edward Gordon Craig. This was to be a seminal influence on my work. Craig talked about becoming an Artist of the Theatre and to do that you had to be able to do everything, not to the same degree but so that you could respect and understand the different components that go into making a piece of work. No one element was more important than the other - the word was not God. I realised that this was what I wanted to be - an artist of the theatre.

The second event was that I met Janet Goddard, a fellow first year, and we discovered we liked doing the same things - having cups of tea, going shopping and talking about ideas whilst we were pursuing these activities. Leeds Art School was unique because there were no separate departments, there was just the studio and you were left alone to do whatever you wanted – painting, sculpture, print making, it was up to you. At the end of this massive hangar was a black box with a lighting grid - the performance studio - and there we were encouraged to experiment by our tutors who were the luminaries of performance at that time.

Alongside our own individual art practice, we were supported to form a 30 strong performance company Soft Soap and we experienced touring performance festivals and seeing other companies all in our first year. Janet and I then formed Hesitate and Demonstrate, named after our two interests at that time, the photographs of Eduard Meyerbridge and demonstrations in department stores. We would study the out-of-work actors in the basement demonstrating unique gadgets that showed extraordinary ways to chop vegetables and the terrifying women in white coats in the make-up departments who would come towards you spraying perfume aggressively and whisk you off to be made up to look like a mannequin.

We received our first Arts Council grant the day we left college, to do our art attack street performances around genteel areas of Yorkshire - Harrogate, York, Scarborough, and also the NRLA when it was based in Nottingham. We would turn up dressed in little suits with handbags like the Queen and choose shopping arcades and pedestrian precincts to perform our work. These outside events were very simple; Janet and I would open our handbags, take out our powder compacts and powder our noses, which was the cue to go into a style of movement that was inspired by the freeze frame photography of Meyerbridge. Not slow motion, not mime, but slightly slower than reality. Janet might take out a chocolate cake from her handbag with a cherry on and I would take out a cake without a cherry and the performance would be me chasing Janet down the street in this style of movement to pinch the cherry off her cake. We would do flower arranging on traffic roundabouts, boxing matches at the end of piers - all using objects from our handbags. We would also take furniture for a walk, seeing no reason why we couldn't, taking sofas or armchairs and tea trolleys for day trips to the seaside. We began to be booked by festivals which was fun in August but miserable on a cold, damp day on Scarborough sea front.

So we went indoors, deciding to perform in art galleries with white walls and spotlights

but we hated it. People would come and look at us, waiting for us to do something important and we realised that we liked creating work where we would appear and disappear and people would ask, "What was that?" They would never look at a woman reading a newspaper in the street in the same way again after seeing us perform with newspapers. We worked with reality and then slightly changed it so that what happened was unexpected.

The Oval House invited us to take over their upstairs theatre for three months and create whatever we wanted. We were allowed to wallpaper the walls, lay carpets, grow turf, build brick walls; all highly unusual in theatres at that time. After a while realised that we had not spoken in three shows and that, although not a political decision against the use of text, we knew we would only use words if they were relevant to the piece. We then became known as one of the first non-verbal theatre companies or visual theatre companies. We were popular with the British Council as there wasn't a language problem and we began touring mainland Europe extensively. Janet left to have a baby and I became sole Artistic Director.

Hesitate and Demonstrate was of its time. I am of the generation of art students that wanted to take our work off the walls of galleries - release it from the commercial sector, create work that was ephemeral and of the moment, a "live art" influenced by tutors whose own work came from happenings and where documentation was not important – in fact opposed, as it meant that there would then be a concrete form of art that existed.

Unfortunate circumstances, including a truck crash, a destroyed set and a recession, led to the demise of Hesitate and Demonstrate. It was a challenging time as one way of life was over and I became a full-time lecturer in performance. I loved teaching, working with students in spaces that had their own history - found sites rather than in the empty neutral spaces of theatres waiting to be filled with other peoples' imaginations. I started putting the pieces back together.

It was at this point that I realised I wanted to change direction and spoke to Nikki who knew my work and had booked Hesitate and Demonstrate when in Nottingham. I realised that the NRLA was the perfect forum in which to develop my work because I wanted to create a performance installation in a non-theatre space. I have always been inspired by the work I have seen at the NRLA in its different homes; from emerging and established artists, from the platforms, the commissions and the students who attend. I loved the enthusiasm and energy. I feel privileged to have seen the NRLA grow and develop from its beginnings at the Midland Group through to the Third Eye, the Arches and the Tramway with its brief London stopovers at the ICA and the Riverside. Part of its strength has been that it is not London based, allowing the National part of its title to be truly represented.

Shattered was commissioned for the NRLA in 1988 at the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow. Inspired by the fishing net huts in Hastings, the piece was planned to be about environment and architecture; the sea, dark wood towers and shingle. With three female performers, including myself, in white satin dressing gowns and Doc Martins, crunching

through the shingle that surrounded three wooden fishing net huts, the piece became about death – both of Hesitate and Demonstrate and a man whom I had loved. The commissioning of the piece enabled me to continue as an artist and gave me the support and confidence to move in a different direction, away from touring performance theatre towards creating installation/performances.

In 2000 I set up my own company, *Corridor*, a site specific performance company creating large scale site specific events in unusual buildings. The template of Corridor's style of work is that of young people, older people and arts and community groups working alongside professional practitioners to transform empty buildings through light, sound, installation, dance, music, video and performance into all encompassing events. I had been working in empty houses, hotels and hospitals, often with up to 300 people and although I loved it, longed to create a smaller scale installation. I talked to Nikki and was commissioned for the NRLA 2003. *Till Human voices wake us...* was created for a basement office in the Arches. I transformed this grey, neutral space into a formal garden – a peaceful oasis of trellis, box hedges and topiary inhabited with the traces of a woman, her face seen reflected in the water of the bird bath and her constant journey down an avenue of trees seen through the piles of leaves in the wheelbarrow with the sound of bird song. This commission enabled me to find some peace and space from my large scale work but still influenced by site because the underground office inspired the form and structure of the garden

While Corridor continued to create performances in sites, including empty swimming pools in Soho I knew that I wanted to try something different; to create an environment and place it in a neutral space, rather than transforming a site itself. So I was commissioned for the NRLA 2006 and created *Sea View*, a self contained B&B corridor, with the breakfast room at the front and, past closed numbered doors, a bedroom at the back. This environment was placed in the gallery space of the Tramway as though it had been ripped out of a building and dropped into a gallery. I had begun to experiment with video imagery but this installation allowed me to develop it with the image of swimmers behind glass seen floating past the holes smashed into the plaster wallpapered walls of the corridor. As an artist, *Sea View* was a pivotal development of my work as I had begun to create self contained environments that could be placed anywhere - no longer just working in a found space that would inspire me. My experience in fine art and theatre had begun to come together, creating for me a new vocabulary that I aim to take forward in to my future projects.

So, another answer to that angry young woman at the Riverside Studios is that I had every right to sit on that panel and so has every artist who, no matter what artform or background they come from, believes in breaking through the prejudices that may still exist, using the method of their own work.

Geraldine Pilgrim, January 2009