

The Changing Landscape for Performance Art in the 1980's

**a personal reflection by
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I was initially drawn to performance during my time as curator of exhibitions at South Hill Park Arts Centre in the late seventies and early eighties. In those days South Hill Park was not blessed with a purpose-built gallery, so the exhibitions took place in the corridors and staircases of the Victorian mansion house and in one dedicated room with ornate cornicing, framed mirrors, and full height windows on two walls. These spaces were much loved and architecturally imposing, but nevertheless did not lend themselves as suitable neutral backdrops for much contemporary art. In a very practical sense performance offered a way of working within the exhibition programme in that it was not limited by these spaces and was able to move out into other unspecified areas of the building and in the summer months to make use of the extensive parkland attached to the Arts Centre.

In addition performance seemed to offer much to a socially aware arts programme. The direct engagement between the artist and his or her public characterised by live work was very much in keeping with the arts centre ethos of the period. Artists often chose to work live in an acknowledged denial of the art object, and as a challenge to the commercial commodification of art. Women artists especially were drawn to performance, as a practice without the male dominated histories associated with sculpture and painting. Encouraging new developments in art practice and at the same time reaching out to new audiences locally were key elements of our arts policy. Within fine art circles performance was enjoying a revival – the Acme Gallery in Covent Garden was presenting groundbreaking work by Stuart Brisley and Kerry Trengrove amongst others and Mona Hatoum made one of her early seminal performances for the terrace at South Hill Park. Influenced by these events, subsequent festivals, commissions and residencies at South Hill Park attempted to draw the region's arts and local communities to this often controversial but clearly influential area of practice.

Inspired by the artists that I'd worked with during this time, in particular two outdoor sculptural light and sound events with the late Stephen Cripps, I found myself moving towards a more exclusive relationship with performance, and in 1983 I accepted the post of Combined Arts Officer at the Arts Council. Whilst this position assumed responsibility for those arts centres around the country still in receipt of national funding, it also included custodianship of a modest allocation for performance art. Prior to my arrival the Arts Council had received a heavy pounding from the press as a result of grants given to a number of performance art projects, most notably to the three-man group Ddart, who undertook a durational performance walk around East Anglia whilst attached to each other by a pole fixed to helmets on their heads. Probably as a direct result of the negative media coverage, the performance art allocation had moved into safer territory and was largely supporting cross-discipline work where, for example, dancers were beginning to work with sound or text, and filmmakers with live musicians.

Mixed discipline work was clearly worthy of public subsidy, but I realised that in the process, individual fine artists looking for support to make live work had been squeezed out of the picture. Few artists then and now consider themselves exclusively concerned with the live element of their work, but the costs incurred in making live work with no possibility of sales at the end of the day, made it a priority for subsidy. After some delicate internal negotiations with other art form departments who had seen this allocation as a useful adjunct to their programmes, it was eventually agreed that these few funds would be better concentrated on support to the area which in the seventies they were set up to encourage – to fine artists making performance work.

This decision coincided with great changes politically and as the Thatcher government began to make deep inroads into public subsidy, so artists and arts organisations had to attract support from a range of sources in other public and private sectors. Set against the backdrop of decreasing public funds, there was pressure on each subsidized project not only to create high quality, innovative work but also to demonstrate value for money by reaching out and engaging with new audiences. It therefore seemed sensible to encourage partnerships between artists and sympathetic promoters who could offer additional support to an Arts Council-funded project. The first Performance Art Promoters scheme was launched in 1985 with the intention of identifying organisations with a track record in live art who, through careful programming and related educational and marketing campaigns, could guarantee that live art commissioned under their aegis would be enhanced and supported.

Three organisations in Newcastle, Brighton and Nottingham were the first recipients of funds through this scheme. The Zap Club was already attracting big audiences for its adventurous mix of programme in arches on the Brighton seafront. Projects UK in Newcastle had emerged out of the artist-run Basement Group and were inviting leading international artists to make new work for the city. In their current incarnation as Locus + they continue to be responsible for an adventurous programme of commissions and collaborations and they hold a valuable archive of their early performance work which formed the basis of a recent touring exhibition. The Midland Group in Nottingham were attracting audiences from around the country to the annual National Review of Live Art (initially entitled Performance Art Platform) and a significant proportion of their year-round theatre programme was devoted to performance. Each of these promoters offered a different and distinctive context within which performance could be viewed. Although with relatively modest funding, the scheme also established a precedent for ways in which other arts organisations might take over from the arts funding agencies the responsibility for commissioning new work.

During the next few years others became involved in the Performance Art Promoters scheme and live art commissions were undertaken by Hull Time Based Arts, The Leadmill and Pitt Street Studios in Sheffield, The Green Room in Manchester, Urban Vimbuza in Liverpool and a consortium of promoters in the West Midlands. As a result of this programme much rich and challenging work emerged. Performance developed its potential to be both large scale and dramatic, and at other times contemplative and intimate. Some works engaged in a formal investigation of the medium and others tackled strong political content. The increasing use of new technologies opened doors to whole new areas of experiment. William Furlong and Michael Archer were commissioned to make *Accent for A Start* for New Work Newcastle. Tape recorders were used as both instruments and the source of pre-recorded sound to create a performance which explored the nature of a particular geographic environment and its impact on those who lived within it.

By the end of the eighties the Performance Art Promoters scheme at the Arts Council represented only a small contribution to a burgeoning practice, which was being developed at a pace by arts organisations who had already recognised the value of such work. The Hayward Gallery devoted a season to performance. The British Art Show dedicated an entire section to live work. The ICA's theatre programme run by John Ashford and Michael Morris presented seminal work both within the theatre space (Impact Theatre's *The Carrier Frequency* is one I particularly remember) and (as with La Fura del Baus on the Isle of Dogs) at independent locations around the capital. Often as a direct result of the Arts Council's Glory of the Garden initiative which gave emphasis to contemporary work within the museum and gallery sector, performance art was embraced in these settings as never before and was particularly apparent at the Laing in Newcastle, the

Mappin in Sheffield, the Ferens in Hull and the City Art Galleries in Southampton and Stoke on Trent. Furthermore the Drama Projects fund at the Arts Council was able to offer more substantial support to a number of performance art companies such as Station House Opera and the Bow Gamelan Ensemble both of whom helped shape the practice at that time.

Against this backdrop of increased support and expanding provision, it was important that the performance art allocation was used more strategically. As new audiences and promoters were eager to get in on the act, so it was necessary to consider ways in which the history and wider development of the practice might be supported. Attention turned to documenting and publishing. Very few books were devoted to the history of performance and with the exception of Projects UK little emphasis was given to archiving. Nottingham Trent University became the host for the first national archive of live art. To guarantee the survival of good work across the spectrum artists needed support at early stage in their careers. Collaborative initiatives with the Arts Council education department resulted in performance artist placements in several key art colleges – Nigel Rolfe at Newcastle, and others at Dartington and Brighton – further encouraging the consideration of the practice within traditional fine art courses. Traineeships (forerunners of current mentoring schemes) gave younger artists an opportunity of working with those more experienced – for example, Trevor Cromie collaborated with Richard Layzell and Jon Stanton worked with Anne Bean.

In the nineties, with the arrival of Iain Reid and Lois Keidan to the Arts Council, a much more substantial allocation, the New Collaborations fund, was established to support mixed discipline work and many performance artists benefited from this scheme. Independent arts organisations began to offer services which supported live art in a multitude of ways. In addition to their producing role Artsadmin, and later the Live Art Development Agency, offered bursaries, advice, training, and showcasing of new work. During my time as Artists' Development Advisor at Artsadmin, Nicky Childs and I edited *A Split Second of Paradise* a collection of essays which traced the development of several key artists engaged in live art and performance. There is now a plethora of books devoted to the subject, but at the time artists felt that their work was overlooked by critics, writers and journalists. Performance in the noughties is enjoying another revival. Commercial galleries take an interest. Much film work encompasses performativity. The need to manipulate materials in a physical, visual way and the desire to distinguish between putting on an act and being there, making the work happen before a live audience still holds strong for many artists.

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