

LIVE ART IN THE UK by Jennie Klein

The National Review of Live Art,

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This past March the National Review of Live Art, the longest running international festival of performance art in the world, celebrated its 30th anniversary. The National Review of Live Art, or NRLA, is part of New Territories, a larger, month-long festival devoted to experimental performance work in theater and dance. It is a celebration of the most experimental live art, whether it is dance, theater, film/video, or site specific/installation. This year's NRLA paid homage to the history of the festival. For the occasion of the 30th anniversary, Nikki Milican, the artistic director, invited a number of artists and artists' collectives who were involved with the NRLA from its earliest years, including Alastair Snow, Alastair MacLennan, Neil Butler, Stephen Partridge, Anne Seagrave, Anne Bean, Robert Ayers, Richard Layzell, Akademia Ruchu, Marty St. James, Forkbeard Fantasy and Forced Entertainment. Neil Bartlett, the first MC of the festival, donned his traditional gown and heels once more to MC the festival on Saturday night. Younger artists who had began their careers at the NRLA in the platform program such as Curious (Helen Paris and Leslie Hill), Sam Rose, Richard DeDomenici, FrenchMottershead, Kate Stannard, Francesca Steele, Sheila Ghelani and Kira O'Reilly performed as well. International artists included Varsha Nair, STELARC, Guillermo Gómez-Peña/La Pocha Nostra, István Kovács, Esther Ferrer, Ron Athey, Jamie McMurry, Lee Wen, La Ribot, Monali Meher, Wladyslaw Kasmierczak and Ewa Rybska, Yann Marussich, Silke Mansholt and Zoran Todorović.

The NRLA 2010 was a condensed and intense version of the past 30 years; a record of performances/actions from the late seventies until today. In the years since it first debuted, the NRLA has become the place to see the newest and most experimental live artists and art. It is the occasion for the meeting of the international coalition of live art programmers and organizers. The program of the NRLA is thus reflected in other live art venues, which book the same artists that have first appeared in Glasgow. Unlike previous NRLAs, there were no platform or elevator artists (elevator artists are slightly further along in their careers). Instead, there was a vastly expanded program of artist's talks, workshops and presentations. There was also more work than usual, with performances/actions taking place at the CCA, the Glasgow Film Theater, the Arches, and Tramway from 11 a.m. to midnight. As always, the NRLA program went non-stop from 10 a.m. to midnight/1 a.m. the following day. The program this year was of a particularly high quality, with nary a poorly rehearsed or ill-conceived performance in sight. What follows then, is a discussion of performances and lectures that helped to shape and expand upon the theme of the NRLA 2010.

ARTISTS' TALKS

In the past several years, Milican has instituted the "artists' breakfast." Artists who had performed, or were about to perform, would meet with festival attendees, curators, and programmers and elaborate upon the meaning of their work. This year the artists' talks and panel discussions served to frame the history of the NRLA and of live art/performance art in the UK. Rob La Frenais, the founding editor of *Performance Magazine* (1979-1992) gave a talk about the early years of that publication, writing performance criticism, and the state of the live art/performance art (there was a debate about what to call it) during the years that he served as editor. La Frenais' performance/lecture, which was assisted by Anne Bean, provided a nice counterpoint to many of the performances that took place in the

evening. *Performance Magazine* often reviewed the performances done by the Midlands Group, including the work of Robert Ayers and Company, and promoted the various manifestations of the NRLA. Artists and writers who were involved with or profiled in *Performance Magazine* in the early years such as Alastair Snow, Forkbeard Fantasy, Silvia Ziranek, and Ian Hinchliffe either lectured or performed at the NRLA. It was particularly enjoyable to see Hinchliffe perform *Chubbin' Mondays (or how to nearly escape from senility)*, a performance ostensibly based on fishing, although it veered off into all sorts of directions. True to nature, Hinchliffe drank a bottle—or maybe two—of red wine, chugging it down between handfuls of crisps. In the late seventies, Hinchliffe was one of the more outspoken and colorful contributors to *Performance Magazine*. 30 years hence, he is still much the same, if older and a bit more “senile.”

La Frenais' talk was complimented by that of Lois Keidan, the co-founder and director of the Live Art Development Agency. A tireless promoter of live art, Keidan got her start working as Milican's assistant when the Midlands Group was still based in Nottingham. Keidan went on to program the live art program at the ICA in London. When that position ran out of funds, Keidan founded the Live Art Development Agency, or LADA. LADA has filled the lacuna left when *Performance Magazine* ceased publication. LADA includes a reading room, a book store (Unbound), and a collection of performance videos, books, and periodicals that are available to anyone who wishes to research live art. LADA also facilitates the professional development of young live artists with grants, information packets, and DIY: do it yourself development projects designed by artists for artists. The LADA website (<http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/index.html>) serves as a link to festivals, institutions, people, and organizations such as ArtsAdmin and New Work Network that promote live art. Keidan's talk, “Partial Recall,” which profiled younger artists that had emerged in the past 10 years thanks in part to the work of LADA, linked the two generations of artists performing at the NRLA, by demonstrating how the younger artists such as Sam Rose, Kira O'Reilly and FrenchMottershead had built upon the work of the artists profiled in *Performance Magazine*.

HISTORIES AND ARCHIVES

Keidan asked the audience members at her talk to pool their memories of 30 years of the NRLA to form an anecdotal history of the NRLA. Keidan's talk was one of many events/performances that were based on the history/archive of the NRLA. On the final day of the festival, Paul Clarke chaired “Remembering Performance,” a panel discussion with Claire MacDonald, Geraldine Pilgrim, Richard Layzell, and Heike Roms (along with a few others) that looked back at 30 years of the NRLA to ask how performance can be remembered and honored. The panel discussion was accompanied by the debut of the first case study undertaken by the Live Art Archive at Bristol University, which has recently digitalized the extensive collection of videos and films from the NRLA. For the first case study, artist Richard Layzell, in collaboration with the staff at the archive, returned to video works that he screened in *I Never Done Enough Weird Stuff* (originally screened at the NRLA in 1996) as he sought to preserve a live work using interviews to enhance the usefulness of video documentation. The original version of Layzell's video fails to fully reproduce the performance. With the help of Layzell, Paul Clarke, Clare Thornton, and Stephen Gray provided meta data that included a commentary by Layzell and recollections by Milican, thus providing the viewer or researcher with several layers of explanation for the piece.

Layzell's *I Never Done Enough Weird Stuff, a Case Study on the Preservation of Performance*, which will be available to view at <http://www.bris.ac.uk/nrla/case-study/pads/pads.htm> when it is completed, involves performing the archive, re-enacting Layzell's earlier documentation to create a richer, multi-syllabic text. The NRLA is a festival of performance, and a number of artists "performed" their histories/archives. On the first day of the festival, for example, Stelarc gave a performative lecture about his work on "the body" in which he covered the span of his career. The lecture ended with Stelarc asking his virtual head questions via the computer. Silvia Ziranek performed FOOT, FOOD, AGO, a piece that played with words, table settings, glitter, and shoes to explore how one acts and interacts with others. The following day, Ziranek gave away bits of her archive—pieces of past performances that were listed in the NRLA diary—to audience members, all the while regaling them with her history of fashion, fun, and being a "mum." On the final day of the festival, LEIBNITZ (founded by Ernst Fischer and Helen Spackman) performed *Ghost Letters*, a haunting and beautifully choreographed installation of miniature landscapes of past performances. Garbed in long, flowing dresses, two performers created miniature installations of sand, water, photographs, and corporeal objects such as blood and fingernails on trays that were laid out for that purpose. All the while, a photographer moved amongst the artists and the audience, documenting the moment with images that were mounted on the wall. At the end, all that remained were the images and the traces of the installations.

Other artists, following the lead of Keidan and Layzell, "performed" the NRLA archive. Richard DeDomenici's *DeDomeNRLArchive* was collection of anecdotes and objects taken from nine years of attendance at the NRLA. *DeDomeNRLArchive* was a considerably more scatological and irreverent look at the NRLA than that provided by Keidan several days later. In the span of approximately one hour, DeDomenici managed to remember the most oddball happenings of the NRLA, including the time that the fire alarm went off in the Tramway while Rob Athey was lying nude with fishhooks piercing his forehead on a frame with wheels. The audience was also privy to DeDomenici's (less than complimentary) observations about various performances. By far the most intriguing engagement with the NRLA archive was that of Trace Collective, an artists' group that includes André Stitt, Eddie Ladd, Holly Davey, Philip Babot, and Tim Freeman. In a durational performance *Post-Historical-Cluster-Fuck* that lasted for two days, Trace Collective, garbed in a non-descript workman's uniform, photocopied all of the archived material from the NRLA, including catalogues, posters, flyers, and programs. This photocopied material was then placed in a paper shredder and redistributed to members of the audience. The actions that took place throughout the performance were archived—some of the images can be seen on www.tracegallery.org.

ACTIONS

As always, the bulk of the performances at the NRLA involved actions that took place in real time and space. The genesis of live art in the UK can be traced back to artists such as John Latham, Jeff Nuttall, Stuart Brisley, Genesis P. Orridge, Gustav Metzger, Barbara Steveni, and Ivor Davies, all of whom came from an art school background and had turned to actions in order to subvert the commodity system of the gallery and reinsert art into real life. In 2010 there were quite a few durational pieces, some of which lasted for several days. For her piece *RAW(body as machine)*, Kate Stannard simulated the Race Across the West (RAW), an 860 mile bicycle ride through the desert. Beginning on Wednesday, Stannard tried to ride 860 miles on a stationary bike in various locations inside the Arches. An LED screen tracked her progress, which Stannard periodically recorded on a chart along with her caloric intake. Marcia Farquhar in *The Omnibus* paid homage to long-durational performance of the past by hosting "a

marathon, live-in, 30-hour rumination on the subject of the last 30 years.” For 30 hours, Farquhar gave readings, screened movies (her own and those of others), cooked, played records, and cat napped on an air mattress while audience members dropped in and out. The audience was encouraged to interact with an increasingly sleep-deprived and manic Farquhar, who never seemed to stop talking even while catnapping.

The Irish artist Alastair MacLennan, who in the past has done long durational performances both as part of Black Market International and as an individual artist, performed *Ink Ash*, a four hour durational piece. MacLennan’s performance, which took place right outside of the room where Farquhar had set up camp, was very different in feeling. A long time practicing Buddhist, MacLennan’s work is based upon chance connections and the idea of enlightenment in the midst of absurdity. For his performance, MacLennan, garbed in black, sat in a large glass vitrine blowing up white balloons and periodically writing in a small journal. As the evening unfolded, the space became increasingly filled with balloons while the condensation on the glass made it difficult to view the artist. For three hours Yann Marussich, his right side pierced by a metal stake, remained on an orange sofa surrounded by a carpet of white feathers. Slowly and imperceptibly, the artist executed one movement. *Blessure* was about finding stillness in movement, in finding an internal journey while viewing a barely perceptible external journey. *Blessure* was followed by a shorter piece, *Brisures*, a continuation of the meditation on stillness. In *Brisures*, the feathers were replaced by shards of glass.

The stake that pierced Marussich’s flank would have made it impossible for him to have performed *Blessure* in the U.S. One of the reasons that the UK has become the center of live art is that the regulations governing what can and cannot take place in a performance space are considerably less rigid than the U.S. (although more rigid than in Asia and other parts of Europe). As in the past, many of the actions involved both risk and intimacy—a risk to the body of the artist accompanied by the intimate connection between artist and audience as the latter witnesses the vulnerability of the artist’s body. Ron Athey, channeling St. Sebastian, Jesus Christ, and possibly David Wojnarowicz as well, performed *Self Obliterations I, II, and III: Ecstatic, Sustained Rapture, Mortification*. Using a wig, brush, needles and a few sheets of glass, Athey began by vigorously brushing the wig, which turned out to be a latter day crown of thorns that was attached to his head with the pins. By the end of the performance, a number of audience members had fainted as Athey’s (HIV+) blood sprayed out of his forehead. On Sunday, Kira O’Reilly, who had assisted in keeping the audience members at a safe distance from Athey’s bloodletting, performed her elegant action *Untitled (syncope)*. Surrounded by literally hundreds of people, most of whom had to stand on tiptoe or squat down to view her movements, O’Reilly performed a “dance” with her 43 year old untrained body, quoting movements from past performances and films. At one point, O’Reilly, garbed only in a fancy hat and red high-heeled shoes, bent down and made two careful cuts on her calves. As she continued to move, the blood flowed down her legs and into the shoes, mingling with their bright color.

COMMEMORATION

While something resembling the NRLA will continue to be offered by New Moves International, Nikki Milican has made it clear that 2010 would be the final year for the NRLA. There was a special urgency to commemorate this particular festival. In 2006, the artist duo FrenchMottershead, as artists in residence, took a photograph every night of the festival attendees. These five photographs, which can be viewed on their web site

www.frenchmottershead.com , are an interesting documentation of who had passed through this festival and who had stayed, who was trying it out, and who was there for the long run. As the crowds grew on Friday and Saturday night, the artists were forced to move the crowd to different locations in order include all of the people who wished to be included in the photograph. For the NRLA 2010, FrenchMottershead re-enacted their 2006 performance *A Daily Ritual to Capture the Presence of Everybody*, gathering everyone (audience members, workers, organizers, Arts Council officials) together after the performance by Forced Entertainment to take one last picture. *Were you here the last time?* was, as the web site notes, “a last moment, when the NRLA reached its critical mass, for all to represent themselves in a wider community of others. It’s for all who recognise the importance of the different participants (artists, audience, technical crews, programmers and our international guests) that make an event like the NRLA possible, and acknowledge the collective nature of artistic production.”

A last moment, a re-enactment that is a new performance, a building upon and expansion into what came before... Milican and her staff set a high bar for themselves when they decided to work towards a gala 30th anniversary festival. The results did not disappoint.

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