

THE LIST

The National Review of Live Art 30th anniversary

Mark Fisher 25 February 2010



The National Review of Live Art has been doing its subversive thing for 30 years but, despite a line-up of old favourites, nostalgia is not on the menu, finds Mark Fisher

It all seems wrong. The National Review of Live Art has built its reputation on change. It never looks back and never stays still. The annual bonanza of what used to be called the avant garde has doggedly embraced the disconcerting, the deviant and the dumbfounding. Even in format it has been restless; switching cities from Nottingham to London to Glasgow; switching venues from the CCA to the Arches to the Tramway (and this year all three); and switching time of year from autumn to spring.

For this festival to have reached its 30th birthday feels like a betrayal. You want the NRLA to be forever young, mocking the passage of time like a performance art Peter Pan, ushering in the shock of the new, not the complacency of the middle-aged. That it is commemorating the occasion with something perilously like a retrospective is more alarming still. This is an event where you have to brace yourself for women becoming

body-builders as part of their 'artistic practice' (Francesca Steele) and others simulating an 860-mile endurance cycle race (Kate Stannard). You don't expect candles and birthday cake.

Yet take a look at the line-up. It's full of names such as Alastair MacLennan, who has been on the scene since graduating from Dundee's Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in the 1960s and who created a non-stop 96-hour performance/installation for the NRLA in 1987. Or there's Ron Athey from Los Angeles who launched his career in the 1980s with a group called Premature Ejaculation before moving on to what he called a 'performance torture trilogy'. Nice.

These and more than 100 former darlings of the NRLA will be back in town for a five-day anniversary bash made up exclusively of artists who have played a part in its history. But fear not. It will be the same bonanza of innovation as it ever was, says Neil Bartlett who graduated from being 'mistress of ceremonies' at the NRLA in the late-80s to running the Lyric Hammersmith for ten years and is even now finishing off a script for the National Theatre in London.

'When people tell me I'm mainstream, I say, "Hmm, yes, did you see my show at the Vauxhall Tavern?"' he says, denying that a return to the NRLA is a backwards step. 'It'll be absolutely the opposite. No one's going to go, "Ah, let me tell you about the wonderful old days." Everyone's doing a piece of new work. I've been talking since 1983 about how "mainstream" is a redundant category. If you look at the roster of artists working at any mainstream venue, then you will see people who were labelled deviant, dissident or uncategorisable in the 1980s. The theatrical languages of the 1980s have completely permeated into the mainstream.'

His only concern to do with his NRLA appearance is about getting back into drag. 'I'm worried about my feet,' he says. 'My legs are as good now as they were, but the challenge was always the sheer physical pain of wearing shoes for that long. My feet used to bleed.'

Bartlett is part of a programme that ranges from a man making a meal from human tissue (Zoran Todorovic) to a woman sticking hair to her face to make her look like political figures from the Middle East (Oreet Ashery). Helping us make sense of it all is Ian Smith, mainstay of Glasgow street theatre company Mischief La-Bas, who is making his 14th appearance as MC. 'I think of it as a big swimming pool that I jump into now and again,' he says. "'Density of experience" is the phrase that comes to mind. It's very intense. Dare I say like a trip? The beauty is that it is so varied. It's like the components of a meal: individually you wouldn't want to live off them for the rest of your life, but put together it's a banquet.'

For Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment, who made his NRLA debut in 1985 with *The Set-Up*, part of the festival's value is its historical perspective. 'It's one of those places where you realise the community of connections is broader than you thought,' says the director of this year's *Void Story*. 'At some of the first festivals we went to there were artists like Alastair MacLennan who was from a previous generation of performance artists. It was tremendously important to me to see that this was not entirely a game for kids, not just something you do when you come out of college, but that experiment in art and performance is a

thing that can sustain itself over a long time.’

With 35 years of experiment under its belt, Forkbeard Fantasy will be on hand to compensate for all the body art and durational installations with a shot of multimedia surrealism. The Colour of Nonsense is an Emperor’s New Clothes-style comedy about the theft of an invisible artwork. ‘It’s humorously autobiographical,’ says the company’s Tim Britton, who has been bringing his cartoon humour to the NRLA since its earliest days. ‘It’s about these has-beens who are still clinging on to the cutting edge while all the young Turks are queuing up trying to knock them off. I’ve seen some fantastic work at the NRLA over the years – and some of it very funny, perhaps more edgily funny than what would go down with a traditional audience. The festival is a wonderful hotbed of experimentalism and there aren’t enough of those places.’

The NRLA, in other words, will offer as rich and varied a feast as ever. The only thing not on the menu is nostalgia. ‘The artform itself has evolved so it would be crazy to stay where we were ten years ago,’ says artistic director Nikki Milican, one of a rare breed to have been awarded an OBE for ‘services to performance art’. ‘You have to keep moving one step ahead of the game. Thirty years is a good psychological moment to put a full stop and move on. It’s not the end of anything, it’s the beginning of the next phase ...’

National Review of Live Art, various venues, Glasgow, Wed 17–Sun 21 Mar.

[The National Review of Live Art](#)

A wealth of invited artists working at the forefront of live art performance comprises the NRLA programme. Taking place predominantly at The Arches but with events also held at CCA, GFT, Tramway and Gilmorehill G12.

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