

The NRLA Platform – a partial history

LOIS KEIDAN

I'm lucky enough to have been to most NRLA festivals since 1986, and over the years the festival has introduced me to so many artists or works whose influence I still feel today. Amongst these were performances and installations by some of the most significant artists of the times like Derek Jarman, Alastair MacLennan, Mona Hatoum, Forced Entertainment and Geraldine Pilgrim, but they also include first works by new artists who had been selected by Nikki Milican for the annual NRLA platform – a critical part of the NRLA mix where young artists could present their work within a rigorous and rich Live Art context, and where audiences were offered a glimpse of things to come.

The Platform had always seemed to me to be the distinguishing feature of the NRLA - something that elevated it from a great festival into an essential element of the Live Art ecosystem - and so I felt honoured when Nikki invited the Live Art Development Agency to be the selectors for the NRLA platforms in 2002 and 2003.

Recognising this vital role the NRLA Platform played as a context and focus for Live Art, we approached our selection process not as an end in itself but part of the bigger picture of support and development for LA in the UK: an opportunity to both select a strong body of work for the festival, and also contribute to the cultivation of conditions in which emerging artists could flourish.

Platforms could be seen as a way of taking the pulse of Live Art – an indication of the state of its health. An abundance of platforms across the country suggests an abundance of artists with the ideas and the energy to make new work, and an abundance of promoters with the enthusiasm and capacity to show it. A dearth of platforms suggests neither. Of course abundance is not in itself a good thing, but the more contexts there are to show new work, the more likely it is that interesting artists and ideas will 'emerge'. Although truly interesting new artists will always make themselves known somehow, struggle shouldn't be an essential part of the deal, and safe opportunities to try things out always help.

Resourced, and even curated, Live Art platforms for emergent artists are a relatively recent phenomena in the UK – probably as new/old (depending on your age) as the NRLA itself. Before then degree shows, 'fringe' festivals, and artist run events were pretty much the only 'platforms' available to young artists. In 1986 Nikki took me along to a few of the events she was attending to select artists for the NRLA Platform, including a Manchester showcase organised by the (then peripatetic) Green Room, and I remember that this gathering of experimental performance makers was such an unusual story in the city – or anywhere - that as we arrived we saw Green Room founder Stella Hall at the centre of a media circus, surrounded by photographers and being interviewed for TV (I like to think by Tony Wilson but can't be sure). As far as I recall, most of the other platform artists that year that were selected from degree shows, or events organised especially for Nikki. It's hard to

believe that there were so few opportunities to see or show new work then when you look at the kind of platform scene there is in the UK today.

Although my recollections of those times are hazy (and selective) I do clearly remember a meeting organised by Nikki in 1986 at the Midland Group, Nottingham (then the home of the NRLA) where risk-taking and experimental artists of performance such as Anne Seagrave and Dogs In Honey voiced their frustration at the scarcity of supportive environments for the kinds of work they were making, and particularly the lack of opportunities for artists who were just starting out to show their stuff. Around the same time ex Impact director Claire MacDonald organised the conference The State Of Play at Riverside Studios in London – an unprecedented (and, to a novice like me, overwhelmingly exciting) gathering of artists, thinkers, promoters and scholars discussing and debating new forms of performance. And it was this urgent desire for better opportunities for new work and new artists – a desire shared by the growing numbers of young artists who were graduating from the new interdisciplinary and performance based courses that were springing up across the country - that helped energise the Live Art landscape in the years to come.

Until the mid 1980s Dartington College of Arts was pretty much the only place that seemed to recognise and teach 'performance' as a practice and discourse with its own integrity. For the most part young graduates from those times were rebels or refugees from visual art, theatre, dance or other disciplines (I am happy to be challenged on this - as I said, my recollections of these times are hazy and selective and I don't know of any official histories to turn to). But by the late 1980s degree courses that privileged performance were flourishing in Manchester, Nottingham, Brighton and elsewhere. Of course its no coincidence that at the time the NRLA and Creative Arts course at Trent Polytechnic shared the same city it was one of the hotspots of Live Art in the UK.

It wasn't so long after this that a generation of promoters who had cut their teeth on the NRLA, and were excited by this new wave of Live Art practices and discourses, felt empowered enough to start developing their own programmes and initiatives to support them. Inspired and influenced by the ways that the NRLA was creating supportive environments and opportunities for new artists, and recognising that if they were also to contribute to a healthy and vibrant Live Art culture they had a responsibility to encourage and support artists at the earliest stages of their practice, the ICA set up the Ripple Effect and Summer Exhibitionists, the (by now building based) Green Room developed things like Made In Manchester, and eXpo began as part of Nottingham's NOW Festival, amongst many other initiatives.

And the platform scene in the UK has grown steadily ever since and, in the process, proved to be a vital part of the Live Art mix. There have inevitably been times of famine and times of feast, and the scene is constantly changing - with flashfires of activity burning for a few years then flaring up somewhere else - but mostly it continues to grow.

And these increasing opportunities to show and see new work have not only been influenced (and inspired) by the NRLA Platform, but have in turn influenced the growth of the Platform itself – from six artists in 1980 to 25 in 2002 (when it was replaced by Elevator).

By the time Daniel Brine and I began the selection process for the 2003 NRLA Platform (our second) in April 2002 there were at least 15 platform events for us to draw on. Some were well established venue based programmes for new work such as Chapter's Experimentica and the Green Room's Emergency, some were regular or irregular artists' led initiatives such as Oxford's Vain Live Art and Bristol's Tonight Mathew I Am .., whilst others were new ventures such as 00000001 platform at the Waygood Gallery in Newcastle and Dublin's Get Up, set up specifically as NRLA Platforms in dialogue with Daniel, Nikki and myself in attempts to fill gaps in provision for dynamic local scenes.

For graduates, platforms are a safety net in the difficult transition into a professional practice: a 'halfway house' as Lois Weaver (who has hosted the annual East End Collaborations platform at Queen Mary, University of London since 1999) would say. They offer a 'real' context to show work that has often been developed within the cosy confines of Higher Education to audiences who aren't just peers and tutors. For artists coming to Live Art from other directions, they are contexts to try out ideas in a supportive environment. And beyond space to present work to an eager public, platforms are an opportunity for artists to meet other artists, develop connections and networks, engage in critical feedback, get a sense of 'how things work', and begin a lifelong process of refining a practice.

On the other side of the experience, platforms are an equally invaluable opportunity for promoters and audiences: providing a critical mass of new voices and new ideas. Platforms are a chance to see the work of newly formed artists, to consider the kinds of ideas and practices a younger generation are engaging with, and to listen and learn from their aspirations.

But whilst recognising the role and the value of dedicated contexts for new work and new artists, there have always been mixed opinions about platforms themselves, with some feeling they might represent a factory farm attitude to a curatorial practice or quick fix solutions for failures of funding.

There can be little doubt that if platforms are approached as cheap and easy options then they have little value. If a night of experimental work by recent graduates is used to paper over the cracks of risk-free programming for the rest of the year then it's an insult. Platforms can be dangerously 'easy': 'easy' to run, 'easy' to fund and 'easy' to get away with. No matter which way you look at it, it's 'less difficult' to raise funds for a cheap and cheerful 'showcase for new talent' than for pretty much anything else (as I said abundance isn't always a good thing). For some areas of the funding system that, despite their best intentions, still don't quite know what to do

with Live Art, the notion of 'a showcase' for new artists will always fit neatly into some box or other. Live Art is often, wrongly, perceived as the domain of the young and I do believe that we must be wary of tendencies to privilege platform level support over provision for artists who have been working for many, many years - of allowing platforms to be the be and end all of support for Live Art.

Platforms are a vital part of the mix, but they are only the beginning of an artistic development process and as much attention must be paid to artists' post-platform lives (and post-post platform lives ad infinitum) if they are to make a real difference. I imagine that it was this kind of thinking, and a response to the booming platform scene in the UK, that led to the NRLA's shift from an annual Platform primarily for recent graduates to Elevator - a programme for artists at the 'next stage' of their practice who have been recommended by a national pool of artists and curators.

Elevator, Arnolfini's Breathing Space, Green Room's Method Lab, Rules & Regs, Live Art Falmouth, Fierce's Platinum and many other initiatives in which artists can develop and sustain their ideas are all a vital part of the process of local and national support; key ingredients in a complex mix of commissioning programmes, curatorial frameworks, critical debates, and professional development initiatives that are having a clear and present impact on the vitality of the Live Art sector.

But back to the NRLA Platform. Looking at the line up of artists and works over the years I was surprised by how many names I didn't remember - artists who have disappeared off my radar and are possibly no longer even artists (maybe this book will smoke them out). Also on the lists are works that were, sadly, bad enough to be absolutely unforgettable. And then there are artists who are no longer working in performance, like Annie Griffin or The Grand Opera of Oklahoma, but whose platform pieces are memorable for all the right reasons - stunning, original works that shaped the way I think about performance.

But what stands out most from the list for me are the many, many Platform artists who are central to Live Art in the UK today - artists who continue to influence and push the possibilities of Live Art as we know it: Chris Cheek (1981), Andre Stitt (1982), Anne Seagrave (1984), Forced Entertainment Theatre Co-Operative (1985), Ralf Ralf (1986), John Jordan (1987), Bodies In Flight (1989), Kirsten Lavers (1990), Donna Rutherford (1993), Ronald Fraser Munro (1994), Lisa Wesley (1996), George Chakravarthi (1998), Oreet Ashery (2000), Richard Dedomenici (2002), Yara El-Sherbini (2003).

Just looking at a this short selection of personal highlights proves to me how crucial the NRLA Platform has been over last 30 years, and how its influence over the next 30 is surely unquestionable.