

## **Documenting the National Review of Live Art – Paul Hough**

I'm sitting bent over in total darkness with one eye pressed to a video camera. The viewfinder is a blank, square, grey screen with the brightness turned up full – through it I can see nothing. My other eye is open and independently trying to focus on the figure lying on the ground, approx. 2 metres directly in front of me. To my immediate right, left and behind me are the audience; Tramway 4 is at full capacity.

The figure begins to move...

I have seen the performance only once, during a nerve racked and tension filled final run through, and I have tried to commit all the carefully choreographed moves to memory. There's no point in writing anything down, there isn't time and as the whole space will be in near darkness, I won't be able to read it anyway. I have assured the artist that I will be able to record an image, all be it a limited one.

She has e-mailed me in advance, keen to help in whatever way she can to make sure that the performance will be successfully documented. She needs evidence of the piece to secure further festival bookings and, more importantly, to submit it with an imminent funding application. We met for the first time only two days ago at the beginning of the festival; we introduced ourselves, chatted briefly and arranged a time to talk through the piece and for me to sit in the run through.

This is documenting the NRLA.

Four crew, five days, 170 hours of videotape.

They are long days, 12 to 14 hours, pressing our bodies into the most uncomfortable and sometimes un-natural positions.

Being invisible.

Each year there's been a new member of the team experiencing a baptism by fire. We are all artists and/or academics in our own rights, so each year someone has been engaged elsewhere, shooting their latest work, writing up their PhD or arranging an exhibition, and as team leader I'll have to find some one new who can handle this kind of challenge. Live Art, Performance Art is challenging for audiences and can be even more so for those who are trying to document it.

Tempers can get short, but only with each other and we soon make up.

I'm tired and every year I swear it will be my last!

I want desperately to see the work with my own eyes, not through a viewfinder. But we've signed in blood and really I wouldn't want it any other way.

When I first started to write this, I, like many before me, began to discuss the merits of whether performance should be documented. As Performance and Live Art practise are transitory should we not just experience the moment? Each of us taking away a completely unique memory of what we, the audience witness, but I decided, other people have written far more eloquently about this dilemma. I also believe that in recent years 'documentation' has now become, in the vast majority of cases, an integrated part of the artistic process.

So I decided to write about my own how and why.

My involvement with the National Review of Live Art began back in 1985. At this time the one good thing (*and the only good thing!*) Margaret Thatcher's government offered recent Art College graduates like myself, was something called the Enterprise Allowance Scheme. It paid a little under £50 per week and stopped us from 'signing on', registering as unemployed. It offered in return one whole year of work 'experience and opportunity'.

And what an experience I had.

Through the scheme, and after a thankfully unsuccessful interview at the National Tramway Museum (!), I found myself in late 1984 newly employed at the Midland Group Art Centre in Nottingham, working alongside Nikki Milican.

From that moment on, I saw and participated in the staging of work at every imaginable level and the NRLA became part of my life.

Jump forward to Nottingham nearly two decades later and Nikki and I are with a group of ex-Midland Group staff in the Broadway Media Centre café bar. We hadn't seen each other recently, though I had continued to attend the NRLA with my students and followed the developments in Live Art when and where possible. Our conversation came around to discussing the forthcoming dilemma that Nikki had no one to document the forthcoming 2003 festival. Everyone was in high spirits and I said, "I'm sure I can do that" and I did.

Complexity vs. Naivety.

Documenting live art is unique, it's not television, but we apply the same principles of discipline and it does cost money, money that is always in short supply. So, what we do each year we do with the best technology and equipment available and with a large amount of commitment from the team.

Frustratingly, the increasing accessibility to technology, and the advent of YouTube prompts a number of audience members to document with small camcorders and mobile phones – don't be naïve – this infringes the artists rights, is exploitative and often misrepresentative of the integrity of the work. We go through a complex process, talk to the artists, have contractual agreements, liaise with the venue, the production team and the technical crews; we stay invisible, treat everyone equally, work professionally as a team and, most importantly, as an integral part of the event.

'Capturing the past, preserving the future'

The unique NRLA taped archive is now held in University of Bristol Theatre Collection and Arts and Humanities Research Council funding (via the AHDS) has allowed digitisation for long-term preservation and increased access to the collection. From its early Lo Band U-matic tapes, through to the current digital formats we are now using, it is a priceless resource for research and future artistic reference. I am proud to have been part of and contributed to, both the NRLA festival and the archive project.

I also want to thank those who documented before me, particularly Steve Littman who, in 1986, started it all.

Also; Steve Partridge, Tony Judge, Patrick Brennan, Greg Giesekam, Lalitha Rajan, Left & Right, and students from Maidstone College, Duncan of Jordanstone and Glasgow University.

A special thanks to those past members of my own team;  
Owen Baxter, Iain Finlay, and to current members - Stuart Simpson, Richard Graham and Adam Biskupski.