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Ancient Memories: before there was a National Review of Live Art

Because I was one of its first audience members, I have been asked to recall the very earliest days of the National Review of Live Art - and of the 'Performance Art Platform' (1979-1982), the 'Four Days of Performance Art' (1983-84), and 'Eight Days: A Review of Live Art' (1985), which were its earlier incarnations.

My account will of necessity be highly personal, but what I'm going to suggest is that during those years there occurred a gradual recognition of an art form - which coincided with the first uses of the term 'live art' - and, instead of a scattering of artists and groups who were uncertain of what they were doing and of who else might be doing it, there emerged - for good or bad - a self-conscious milieu. The fact that I was unhappy with this fact at the time, along with some very peculiar ideas that I had about art, radicalism, and success need to be recorded as a subtext to this history, no matter how embarrassing I find them now.

As I've written before, the conception of what would eventually develop into the NRLA was straightforward enough. It

was established as an annual event in 1979 under the directorship of the Midland Group performance programmer, Steve Rogers, and at the instigation of Anthony Everitt, then the director of the Midland Group, who arrived at the so-called 'platform' format as a means of giving young artists who were working beyond either static media and/or the conventions of the traditional performing arts [the chance] to 'audition' their work in support of funding applications.*

So much for the facts, but it's embarrassing to admit that my recollections of who and what I actually saw in the first couple of years are dim in the extreme. Particularly without a crib sheet of artists' names, and even the NRLA archives in Bristol have nothing from the first few years. Presumably we were given some sort of handout to tell us what we were about to see - it might only have said 'new work by new artists' - but I can't remember that for sure. From what must have been 1979 or 1980 I recall a skinny young man stripped to the waist standing behind a chrome clothes rack. He'd stretched length after length of cling film across it and attempted to use it as a projection screen. This probably wouldn't have been terribly successful even if he hadn't been standing in a brightly sunlit room.

It wasn't until I saw Carlyle Reedy's name listed as part of the 1981 programme that I was able to dredge up a dim memory of sitting very close to her as she performed - she was sitting as well, I suspect - but all I recall is her straight silver hair, her wonderful mellifluous voice (though not what she actually said), the fact that she was wearing all black, and her doing something with her black gloves.

From 1982 I remember Forkbeard Fantasy's *The Cold Frame* and Station House Opera's *Sex and Death*. I know I saw Eric Bogosian's *Men Inside* that year but I have no recollection of it. Nor do I remember André Stitt (*Terra Incognita*), Stephen Taylor-Woodrow (*Club Boring*), or Nick Stewart (*Act of Consummation*), all of whom were on the platform that year.

I have pretty vivid recollections of the 'Four Days' in 1983, though ironically, until I checked the archive, I wouldn't have thought they all came from the same festival. I remember a

Charlie Hooker performance (called *Transitions*, I now learn) in the still-unconverted storefront that would become the foyer of the Midland Group on Carlton Street. There was a circle of weights(?) hanging on strings(?) enclosing a space in which a group of performers counted and stepped in time and rang bells. In an upstairs space, also unconverted, and feeling like a dilapidated office, I recall a small crowd of us standing around Paul McCarthy (whose name meant nothing to me at the time) who was writhing around(?) on the floor, and realizing that he was about to start spraying that ketchup bottle around. I got out of range just in time. I have no recollection whatsoever of Mary Longford's piece *Dancing with Deniz*, despite the fact that I see from an old list of publications that I actually reviewed it for *Performance Magazine*. On the other hand I remember Jeremy Peyton-Jones (who was the Midland Group's performance programmer before Nikki Milican) introducing me to Ian Hinchliffe (*Brass Tacks*) like it was yesterday. (I was in the early stages of planning a festival called 'Performance in Leicester' and Hinchliffe was keen for me to book him. For what it's worth, I didn't, and the festival never happened.) I also remember that though Ivor Cutler's name was much bigger than Hinchliffe's, he insisted on going on first that Sunday evening (with *Performance*), because he had no desire to perform in the physical and intellectual wreckage that would inevitably result from Hinchliffe's performance.

1984's festival, which was Nikki Milican's first, is etched in my memory for the simple reason that that was the year I first performed there. With a game band of collaborators (I grandly called us 'Robert Ayers & Company') I made a strange, sprawling, company-scale performance, *Falling*, in the Midland Group fire escape and sculpture court, and performed it each night of the festival. Of course that meant that I was prevented from seeing a lot of the other work. I missed both Silvia Ziranek (*Some Like Their Own Facts (I'm Expected You See)*) and Rose English (*Plato's Chair*). On the other hand I remember a very young Tara Babel (*Give Him Plenty of Coffee*) preparing her props in an upstairs room, and having to talk her out of her debilitating stage fright. I also remember 'M. Blöb' dressed as a chef using a kitchen knife to finely dice a large bouquet of chrysanthemums (*Transformation*). I can still smell them. I remember being livid with Daniel Haut (*Looking in the Fridge for Feelings*) because he used the gift that had been given to everyone who had attended my performance as a prop in his. And I remember seeing Anne Seagrave for the first time and thinking she was the loveliest creature I had ever set eyes on (*Local Girl Makes Good*).

So much for individual artists and performances remembered or forgotten. What is perhaps of greater significance is how I remember the changes in the more general circumstances, the atmosphere, and what I would risk calling the history. On the one hand, if I try to recall how the early NRLA, its even earlier prequels, and other events at the Midland Group affected what I thought of as the development of performance art in Britain during those years, then I would have to admit that for me, it *was* that development to a large extent. On the other hand, my comprehension of that development has to be put into the context of my experience of performance art before I attended the first Performance Art Platform, and of my knowledge of performance art outside of this country, both of which were extensive.

My first recollection of anything called performance art must date from the winter of 1971-72. I was a first-year fine art student at Leeds University, and I remember being taken along by one of my more knowledgeable contemporaries (who is now the distinguished dance theorist Ramsay Burt) to see something that involved a group of older fine art students led by a guy named Simon Reid. They wore white boiler suits and signaled to one another in semaphore from the balconies of the university library's central rotunda, thus causing consternation among the ordinary library users. From the very outset, then, performance art seemed by its

very nature to be alternative and provocative - about shaking the straights out of their complacency, as we might have put it at the time.

It can have only been a few weeks later that I saw my first real performance artist - in my young mind students were not artists - and that was Roland Miller, whom I first clapped eyes on as he carefully measured the neoclassical architecture of the university's Bonington Court with a 12-inch school ruler, and who - I soon learned - taught at Leeds Polytechnic just down the road from the university. The university and the poly campuses are in fact immediately adjacent to one another, but in the first half of the 1970s we (the students of both institutions) were encouraged to imagine that they occupied different cultural universes. It was certainly at Leeds Poly that performance art thrived - and indeed it had one of its strongest British bastions there - under the leadership of Jeff Nuttall, and with the eager (and often anarchic and intoxicated) participation of the likes of Miller, Hinchliffe, Adrian Henri, Bob Cobbing, George Melly, and other luminaries of British performance art's first generation, all of whom I met or saw in action during my time at the university, and despite the barely concealed disapproval of my own more gentlemanly tutors.

I remember seeing Nuttall ostensibly lecturing on Artaud and terrifying the whole room when he let out a stomach-turning yowl at the beginning of some re-enactment of an Artaud poem. I remember coming as close as I have ever been to being arrested when, during a performance in which Nuttall, Cobbing, and Hinchliffe were involved, and for which I had some sort of responsibility (as a student arts festival committee member). Hinchliffe became absurdly drunk, started eating his beer glass, and had to be physically restrained from masturbating into the face of a young woman in the front row.

It was in this heady context that I first heard mention of Nottingham's Midland Group. Thus, in my mind, it was always tied up with performance art. I first visited the Midland Group in about 1975 or '76, in the company of an acquaintance of mine by the name of Ray Richards, who was a Leeds Poly graduate and a member of the eventually infamous performance art group Ddart. At that time the Midland Group was still located in a grand Victorian mansion opposite Nottingham Playhouse, and Ray and I turned up there one summer's afternoon so that he could negotiate some details of a Ddart performance that was going to happen there. I was encouraged to propose some performance of my own, but I never got around to it.

It was against this history that a set of interrelated ideas - almost all of which I find somewhat embarrassing to reflect upon now - established themselves in my mind. The first was that successful artists (and they didn't have to be all that successful - simply to have someone willing to pay them to make art) were creatures of the utmost veneration for me, the next best thing to pop stars. Indeed for the sheltered Geordie boy that arrived in Leeds in 1971 there was an almost lubricious overlap between what I thought of as the art world and everything that was summed up in the term 'Swinging London': John and Yoko, drugs, transcendental meditation, psychedelia, Peter Blake doing the Sergeant Pepper album cover, all of that stuff. This was a world to which I quite clearly didn't belong, but ached to be a part of, and I convinced myself it could be entered if my art was sufficiently far out. At an intellectual level such fantasies were sanctioned by the notion of modernism, which I - and the majority of my contemporaries - simply took for granted: it was in the nature of art's development, we were taught, that the more important artists at any moment were those who occupied a more 'advanced' position than their predecessors and contemporaries. If this explained why Picasso's cubism was 'better' than Cézanne's post-impressionism, say, or Pollock's action painting was better than Benton's regionalism, then obviously I would be a better artist than

my contemporaries in the fine art department at Leeds (almost all of whom were dutiful painters) if I did something that was further out. And what was further out at the time I stumbled upon by flicking through the pages of *Artforum* in the departmental library - conceptual art and earthworks, for example - and, rather closer to home, keeping an eye on the sort of stuff that was going on down at the Poly - Performance Art! I started making performances and digging holes and typing out manifestos in my second year at Leeds, and never really looked back. What really confirmed these laughable notions in my mind was the fact that they seemed to work: when I graduated in the summer of 1975, my professors decided I should take away a first class degree, gave me a job teaching in one of the local colleges where they validated the courses, and signed me up to do a PhD. I was 21.

This was what first took me to New York City. If art was a means of entry into a world of delicious excitement, then in my cosmology, New York was probably its ultimate home. You should remember that the world I had grown up in was still a gloomy postwar one. Perhaps in London the excitement of all things American had been digested twenty years earlier by the British pop artists, but 300 miles north of London where I lived, Superman comics still carried a real frisson. When asked in primary school to imagine myself as an adult, I drew a picture of a man with stubbly Desperate Dan chin, holding a paintbrush, and standing amid skyscrapers: when little Bobby was grown up, in other words, he would be an artist in New York!

The subject of my PhD was Happenings - the Fluxus-flavored New York performances made in the late '50s and early '60s by Allan Kaprow and his contemporaries - and in 1979 my new employers at Leicester Polytechnic obviously needed to launder some money because they offered me an absurdly generous 'research grant' to go and live in New York and get my PhD finished. If, as I've made obvious, my perceptions of art and artists were already awry, then the next couple of years would really screw me up. Because not only was New York even more terrifyingly exotic than I could have imagined (and in truth the cultural distance between the U.S. and Europe was infinitely greater than it is now), not only did the vast hoard of money that Leicester had given me mean that I was richer than I had ever been before in my life, but I suddenly found myself mixing with artists who actually were celebrities. My closest acquaintances and mentors - to whom I shall be forever grateful - were Carolee Schneemann and Robert Whitman, and I got to know a whole range of artists who most people have never heard of, but I also rubbed shoulders with the likes of Claes Oldenburg, Bob Rauschenberg, and - hold your breath - Andy Warhol.

So this was my preparation for my first encounter with the Performance Art Platform. In order to justify the money from Leicester, I had to keep going back there to teach. Thus in the early autumn of 1979, and terribly fired up about performance art by my American experiences, I heard about the Performance Art Platform at the Midland Group. (Ironically, although I was teaching less than 25 miles from Nottingham, I suspect I probably saw an ad in the London-based *Performance Magazine*.) Obviously I made a beeline over there.

Though I recall so little of those first couple of years, the Performance Art Platform clearly satisfied my continuing yearning for something way out. In fact, at the outset at least, I felt we were participating in something that was genuinely underground. And even when Nikki Milican arrived in 1984, that sense still endured.

What it's easy to forget is just how different the day-to-day world was in the late seventies and early eighties. The centre of Nottingham was pretty much deserted on a Sunday. Nothing was open, and things could seem bleak in the extreme, especially if it rained, which in my

memory it usually did. If someone had suggested then that the Lace Market would become the trendy cultural quarter which it subsequently became, I suppose we'd have laughed (and probably asked what a 'cultural quarter' was). The Midland Group didn't even have a bar, let alone a restaurant, until the last few months of its existence. The only havens of relative comfort were the 'Old Angel' pub on Stoney Street, and an American diner-style hamburger restaurant on the corner of Carlton Street and George Street (which subsequently became the site of the upscale Sonny's restaurant). This bleakness rather increased my romantic sense that we were on some cutting edge. Around that time I was criticized for saying in an Arts Council meeting that I had recently stood on the pink-walled staircase waiting to enter the Midland Group performance space with Nikki Milican, Midland Group director Fred Brookes, and six other audience members. This gave the sense that performance art was a minority art form, my detractors said. Well, whatever sense it gave, it was true.

It wasn't until 1987, and the first post-Midland Group NRLA at Riverside Studios in London, that I realized that things had definitely changed. There clearly *was* a thing called live art, I realized, and a lot of people knew what it was and knew how to make it, it had the beginnings of its own support structures. It might even be possible to write a handbook on the subject (!).

Still, I remember thinking at the time that this was not an altogether good thing. It didn't fit with my fantasy that performance artists were (and should be) provocative outsiders. (The extent to which this *was* fantasy is settled by simply looking at the facts: I wrote my first review for *Performance Magazine* in 1982, and by 1983 I see that I was an 'advisor to the Arts Council of Great Britain on performance art and experimental projects.' The Arts Council - you don't get much more establishment than that.) But there certainly were undeniably unfortunate aspects to performance art's gradual self-awareness. First of all, artists began more obviously to imitate one another. It may sound absurd now, but when I first saw Forced Entertainment Theatre Cooperative (as they then called themselves, and who were platform performers in 1985) they struck me as little more than imitators of Impact Theatre. Second, performance art began to be taught coherently in art schools and universities. I wasn't terribly impressed when I first saw *Bodies in Flight* (platform artists in 1989) and when I discovered that they had emerged from Bristol University I remember commenting rather snootily that 'this is what happens when you start thinking you can teach performance art.' In addition, and directly related to this, performance art students and graduates suddenly seemed better able to theorize what they were doing than to actually do it. I felt very uneasy about this at the time, and haven't ever changed my mind about it.

This was the context in which the term 'live art' was invented and gradually adopted. I would love to be able to say that I remember the first time I heard somebody use that expression, but I can't. Obviously it was sufficiently well established by 1985 for Nikki Milican to adopt it in the name of the festival, but using it in preference to the term 'performance art' was contentious, and certainly wasn't immediately accepted by everyone. (Indeed some people have never accepted it.) Its usage was certainly in the balance as late as 1990. I remember that the Artists Newsletter book *Live Art* that I edited with David Butler, and which was eventually published in 1991, was referred to as 'The Performance Art Handbook' (a title that I personally preferred) throughout most of its lengthy gestation, and that when its eventual title was mooted at a lunchtime picnic meeting of contributors, Richard Layzell responded mockingly to the effect that if we were 'live' artists, did that mean that we regarded painters and sculptors and all the rest of them as dead? (Ironically though, I think it was the widespread use of that book in degree course teaching that did as much as anything else to enshrine the term live art in accepted British art parlance.)

Whatever people think about the term live art nowadays, we can see with hindsight that what was far more important than its adoption was that contemporaneous emergence of an artistic community. This community, which the NRLA played a central role in bringing about, proved far more important in the subsequent development of performance art in Britain than anything else that came out of the festival's early years. I was utterly wrong. It doesn't benefit any artist to be working in near-obscurity, and to want to work with a tiny audience of initiates is a perverse desire, to say the least. On the other hand, performance artists don't become celebrities, in the main, nor do the more intelligent of them want to. As I have realized for myself over the last 30 years, we make whatever art we make because the art itself is important. The value of the NRLA is that it has enabled so many artists to do so.