

Steve Rogers

The following article appeared in the 1988 National Review of Live Art Programme.

In the beginning The National Review of Live Art was called, simply, the Performance Platform. The year was 1979, the place was the Midland Group arts centre in Nottingham. The platform took place in one afternoon and evening and was attended by about thirty people.

1979 was not only the year the National Review started. It was the year in which the Conservatives took office, and in which *Performance Magazine* started, and it was also the year when it was more or less unanimously agreed that performance art had been an interesting but temporary phenomenon but that it was now over. These events are not unrelated.

Performance art has never had many friends. Those on the right call it anarchic rubbish, to those on the left it is elitist rubbish. The liberal intelligentsia who make up the arts establishment, predictably enough, have mixed feelings. On the one hand they want to defend the artist's freedom of expression, on the other, they find performance art an embarrassment. All too often, just at the moment when they are about to see the pay off of years of rational argument about the number of people who go to art galleries, and the volumes of tourist dollars our art collections earn the country, some lunatic performance artist will spoil it by covering their head in peanut butter and running naked through the National Gallery screaming. Or at least that's how it seemed to them. An awful lot of people were sighing with relief when it appeared towards the end of 1970s that performance art was no more than a passing phase. Just the logical outcome of all that sixties rebelliousness.

As we now know, the reports of the death of performance art had been greatly exaggerated. It was far from dead, it was merely changing its spots. Although many of the artists who had been associated with performance had given up in favour of a return to painting there were still artists making live work. What is more, there were still young artists coming out of art schools wanting to make performances. The biggest problem facing all of them was the consensus that they really didn't exist.

Concurrent with the decline of performance art was the growth of the arts centres. You might have expected that arts centres, with their ideology of allowing the different arts to rub shoulders with each other, would have provided the perfect environment for this bastard thing called performance art which, no matter how you look at it, casts somewhere between the visual and performing arts. The old arts labs, however, were all too closely associated with the sixties, hippies and the Wilson era of innovation and experiment. As the country geared itself up to return a Conservative majority so the arts labs became the arts centres. Respectable, popular, with an accent on tradition and craftsmanship, unlikely to annoy their new Conservative masters. Performance art and all the other outlandish practices of the arts lab had no place here.

It was against this background that the Performance Platform, and co-incidentally *Performance Magazine*, got started. This first platform may have been an extremely modest affair, but its aim was to go against the trend and offer an opportunity for young, unknown and unsubsidised performance artists to have their work mounted in a well known, well established regional arts centre. If you like, the aim was to hoist a banner which would proclaim to the rest of the art world, that performance art was still alive.

Naturally the effect of this solitary standard on the battlefield is that it becomes a rallying point for the troops. Each successive year the platform grew in size and scope. Other marginalised activities such as experimental theatre, video art and installations, made a successful bid to be included and so the event became the National Review of Live Art. It then added, alongside the old platform, new commissioned works from established artists, performances by artists from Britain and abroad, talks, conferences, and a banquet. Last year's National Review took place at London's prestigious Riverside Studios, lasted five days, with over thirty performances watched by an audience of hundreds. In terms of scale and attendances the 1987 National Review was by far the most successful yet. However, the world has changed beyond measure since 1979. The Conservatives are still in power, the arts centres have declined and performance art has re-emerged, or rather it has been re-discovered since it never really went away. For some inexplicable reason the Tory inspired 'Glory of the Garden' regional development strategy has resulted in many major regional museums putting on seasons of performance, performance art crops up regularly in the programmes of established festivals, and trailing after these has come the media. Everyone from *Harpers and Queen*, to the *Economist*, to the *Sunday Times* has done stories on Performance Art, the Phenomenon. Even the serious art magazines which haven't written about performance since the collapse of *Studio International*, and who were principal culprits in spreading the rumours about the death of the form, are running regular reviews of performance events. Just last month, Britain saw its first international festival of performance and related activities, in the shape of the much hyped and well funded EDGE 88. Simple flag waving no longer appears to be necessary.

There is undoubtedly a boom in performance activity right now but it should be handled with extreme caution. There may well be more organisations putting on performance around the country and it may well be appearing more regularly in the pages of the media but if we look beneath the surface we find that very little has changed. Performance is still only officially recognised by a handful of art schools, there is still not one single book on the subject originated and written in this country, there is still not one Regional Arts Association which has a policy on performance and, most serious of all, there is still no structure for the development of young artists. If you look to any other area of practice, whether it be painting or poetry, ballet, bassooning or batik, there is a whole structure of competitions, awards, 'young this' and 'new that', group shows and try-outs which enable the aspirant to continually measure themselves against the established artists and to learn the discipline that an audience provides. For anyone working in performance there are still almost no opportunities to develop skills and prove your worth.

The current boom in performance activity rests on its ability to turn heads and provoke reaction. The once stuffy but now enterprising regional museums have recognised that performance art is one sure way to increase your media and public appeal. It's different and it's unusual and often involves some pretty whacky things. For much the same reason the hip press, *The Face*, *Blitz*, *I-D* etc. have picked up on performance in their restless search for the new and surprising to make up for their lack of real content. The danger is that in exploiting the oddball connotations of performance the art could become, indeed is already showing signs of becoming, no more than a branch of alternative comedy. A kind of cabaret for punters who have seen it all before. Having been ignored for so long it is no wonder that any attention is being welcomed so warmly, but any publicity is only good publicity when your position is unassailable, and without the kinds of things already mentioned (like books and courses on the subject, and a whole structure for developing artists, i.e. without institutions) nothing is safe.

At last year's National Review it was striking that amongst all the new commissioned works, the established artists, the foreign guests, the thing that drew the biggest crowds and caused the most debate was the sight of twelve young unknowns on the performance platform. The work, of course, was extremely variable in quality. But there was a real sense that this work, perhaps not necessarily these particular young artists, represents the performance of the future. The platform was started as an attempt to make up for the lack of structure by which young unknown performance artists could become known performance artists, hopefully whilst they are still relatively young. The platform is still needed to serve that same function. In fact more so now that performance is fashionable than ever it was before. It is particularly welcome then to see the event move from London to Glasgow which more than any other city in Britain has a feeling of innovation, experiment and excitement. More importantly the platform, which was beginning to get squeezed to the edges of the event by all the additional activities is once again squarely at its centre.

The National Review of Live Art is rather like a birthday. It is always a good excuse to have a party and see old friends but it's also a reminder that another year has passed and things haven't really changed that much. At the end of every National Review there is a sense of optimism that with so much energy, enthusiasm and commitment, especially from young artists and audiences, things are bound to improve. The National Review always improves, finding new ways to do new things, finding new artists to help launch, but it sometimes feels like that's the only thing that does. The rest stays the same or even gets worse.