

The Herald

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National Review of Live Art,

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It's over. And not just for another year. Over forever. This, after a 30-year span, was the last National Review of Live Art. Initially NRLA wasn't made to last, but under Nikki Milican's guardian care it continued and evolved: moved city, moved venue and now, in 2010, it has run its course. This final programme positively embraced the past: everyone in its lists had been here before. At every turn, history met itself. It could have been a cocktail of navel-gazing nostalgia. Instead, the five-day event emerged as a celebration of performance in all its shape-shifting aspects and a salute to artists who continue to be both an honest mirror and a probing searchlight in society worldwide.

And maybe that role was most inspiringly reflected by Poshya Kaki. This 19-year-old art student was part of PAVES, a year-long creative collaboration between five women artists working in the UK, Croatia, Israel, Northern Ireland and Kaki's own country, Kurdistan-Iraq. Kaki never made it to any of the other locations: visas were always refused. But a web-link brought her into the PAVES presentation in the Arches, her on-screen face a beacon of determined hope as she sat in her darkened bedroom with a light in her mouth, her muffled voice speaking of her hunger and thirst for freedom. Elsewhere in the Arches, dozens of young artists and students milled around. Their most pressing restrictions? Choosing whether to stay with a durational piece, opt for a live performance, watch videos or have a drink in the bar. Nothing in Kaki's performance begrudged them any of that, but her communicated joy in being a virtual part of NRLA, her resilience in the face of no-go borders and isolating circumstances, was perfect witness to the belief that art can reach out across cultures and oppressive controls.

For Lee Wen, the oppression that now besets him comes from within his own body: Wen is in the early stages of Parkinson's disease. Stravinsky's Rite of Spring followed his slow, deliberate footsteps as – in the little red frock of the Chosen One – Wen enacted rituals of spillage and transformation in a poetic defiance-cum-acceptance of change.

Elsewhere, Kate Stannard pedalled furiously for five days in a static account of RAW, the famous (infamous?) 860-mile endurance bike race across America. As an image of obdurate willpower, physical exertion to the point of exhaustion, even pain, Stannard's cycling caught both the driven nature of the competitive athlete and the artist compelled to make statements through their own flesh – or, in some cases, with their own blood.

Ron Athey, Kira O'Reilly, Boris Nieslony and Yann Marussich all offered potently affecting performances that literally and metaphorically breached the skin that keeps us feeling safe, comfortable, unassailed by issues of suffering for ideals.

And though no blood was shed on camera, John Byrne's video vox pop – he asked, "Would you die for Ireland?" – opened up wounds that are now mythic, and not entirely healed.

Memories were like connective tissue throughout the five days. Never more so when long-established artists like Ian Hinchcliffe or Forkbeard Fantasy performed. There's a heartland of vivid English eccentricity: winks of old music-hall, a love of Heath Robinson lash-ups, a romantic yet robust engagement with the everyday and the fantastical alike which has fuelled much of today's television humours without fans being aware of the live art influences. NRLA audiences young and old roared in delight

At Hinchcliffe's (roguishly astute) maunderings. Lapped up the Forkbeard skite at art-fads in *The Colour of Nonsense*, complete with its genuine Invisible Artwork and sly visual trickeries. Sylvia Ziranek was, as ever, in the pink of wordplay. Liz Aggiss wowed us with her *Survival Tactics*, a bravura volley of agile mischief with ideas and limbs flying in brilliantly ridiculous directions. Marcia Farquhar, like them, in invigorating prime, held the young spellbound across 30 hours of idiosyncratic riffing on life as she has grabbed it across 30 years. Michael Mayhew, in a similar time slot, transformed from wild man driven by demons to a glitter-encrusted gem of outgoing creativity, with giveaway balloons. And Trace Collective shredded it all. Photocopied every page of NRLA documentation, minced and bagged it, recycled as a souvenir. Don't worry about wistfully piecing it all together. If 30 is really the new zero, Milican's festival continues. Look out for New Territories in 2011.