

Tim Etchells

It was at the National Review of Live Art, in Glasgow but the exact year escapes me. It was one time where the entire contingent of the festival – artists, technicians and a good part of the travelling audience - were lodged in the Midland Hotel on Glasgow Central Station itself. The row of late nights and blurred mornings we spent there, entangled with artists and otherwise were made stranger still by the fact that the hotels' other large (probably largest) contingent of guests were the massed and often fully-costumed delegates of a Star Trek convention taking place right there, in the unlikely environs of the ballroom and other conference facilities. The combination of the Star Treks and the contemporary performance crowd made for a vivid meeting ground. Klingons in the elevator. Body pierced performance artists and a scattering of dancers in the foyer. Uhuru, Spock and an assortment of Kirks all drunk at the bar. I don't know what was stranger – the confrontation I had over three days with that year's NRLA art, in all of its beauty and glory, or the encounter I had in a long empty and dimly lit corridor with a lone guy in a Star Fleet uniform, head down and running towards me, a crazed look on his face and a replica Phaser strapped ready and waiting to his thigh. It was 3am. I don't know what perils he ran from or who or what he sought as headed past me in the corridor, then crashed the door to the service stairs heading down, but the friction of the faint wind of sweat and lager as he went past, will certainly stay with me. I guess I am dripped by the sense of worlds passing close to each other, not quite touching. It is years later now. The hotel is gone perhaps, or more likely stripped, gutted re-furbered and franchised to fuck. There will be no more barefoot dancers in the elevators that much is for sure. No more artists asleep in the bar or yelling from those windows, as loud as the trains.

I was at the National Review of Live Art in 1989 when Alistair McLennan made a long performance in the gallery at CCA. He was in there several days. One time I went in it was very dark and he had this full-face mask on and he was standing with a supermarket trolley full of severed sheep heads. I think he was whispering. Another time I went in there and the fluorescent lights were all on very painful bright and he had a penknife and was doing something (carving? cutting?) with these dead trees that he had scattered around in there. I still have the smell of that performance in my head somewhere.

Maybe at the same Review, Anne Beam did something outside. Or maybe that was a later one? She had this long trail of heat-sensitive paper that she had been ironing and then she launched it into the sky on what might have been helium balloons. I still have the chill of that night air in my bones somewhere.

Another year I think and Alan McLean was talking ten to the dozen in his fabulous *Ratman* piece; foaming, ranting, arms flailing in a terrible rain, the downpour of which was formed by brutal means of a hose pipe aimed upwards and turned on full, the water speeding up to the starless darkness of the sky out back of Sauchiehall Street before descending with force. Or am I imagining this? Relocating it from some other venue, some other year? If it fell on your skin you could taste the water and it tasted just like anger and melancholy mixed which seemed appropriate then and now, and I can still somehow taste it. I will taste it, likely, forever.

A year after Forced Entertainment was formed, the NRLA gave us a first glimpse of a scene and a conversation that we would be in and out of for many years. We showed our second project - *The Set Up* - at a platform event at the Leadmill in Sheffield in 1985, then later that year took the same piece to an NRLA collection/selection at the ICA in London.

At base in Sheffield we were, if not isolated as such, then at least part of a community whose edges we knew too well after only a short while making work in the city. Being at the National Review made us sense something bigger; feel that we were part of a conversation that ran up and down the UK, and then on into mainland Europe, and much further afield. Being there shifted the horizon for us, as a lucky encounter with other festivals, encounters with artists or particular programmers has done from time to time, at different moments in the group's work.

NRLA also helped to make tangible, perhaps for the first time, the fact that what we did was connected to something more than theatre - threw us and the work we made into a room that also included performance artists, video-makers, visual artists working in sound, installation and other forms. This experience was formative - not because it all was or felt like a big happy family but because there were chances for both connection and disconnection, agreement and contestation - about what art was, how it could or should work, what it might or might not deal with, what kind of experiences it might generate. We were twenty-something years old and we were hysterically serious about what we did, and probably quite often drunk, and certainly convinced that (in performance and out of it) the world was there to be changed. We saw performances (at NRLA and elsewhere) that changed everything for us certainly, much more so than seems possible now (we may be less easily swayed). And from time to time we saw performances (at NRLA and elsewhere) that we swore were absolutely the worst things we had ever seen in our lives, which continues to happen with a regularity we got used to.

The first National Review I went to, I don't remember the work I saw so much as the people in the bar. Meeting people for the first time there or being aware of them in the background. Or being aware of other people in the foreground and me and my colleagues from Forced Entertainment stood somewhere in the background. Or sat there watching, waiting, thinking, looking around.

By now I have spent more than two decades working alongside some of the people that we met in that bar, or bumping into them here and there and at the National Review of Live Art—which is really one of those necessary places that is summoned from the efforts of dedicated people, a special place on the borders of the world.

We've been back many times and to me, NRLA has always been important as a space to meet people and to see new stuff. Important as a place for artists and audiences to meet and talk and as a temporary home for work that otherwise has none, or for work that only ever finds temporary homes, or work that only seeks or hopes for a temporary home.

In 1993 we made our first durational performance *12am Awake & Looking Down* especially by invitation for the NRLA, presented at the ICA. A long work of this sort was something that we'd never done before and the whole economy of it – dealing with an audience that came and went, dealing with performance as structured-yet-improvised task was a revelatory challenge – a step off the theatre-track which completely changed the game for us. It's a move that has continued to echo and resonate in so many ways through the work we've made since that time – a really significant step in our practice and one which, for all that it seems inevitable now, was quite hard to find the words or frame for at the time. The performance *12am* itself at 12 hours long and comprising physical action focused on high speed costume-changing and endlessly running on the spot – was knackered to the point of delirium. We were hooked immediately though by the dynamic possibilities of duration and exhaustion and fell in love with the formal possibilities of rules, structures, and improvisation as we stretched them to a certain theatrical limit in this way. NRLA had space for us to make the leap of that project in a way that no other festival back then (in the UK or otherwise) would likely have offered or allowed. In subsequent years we created two further durational pieces (*Speak Bitterness* 1994 and *Quizoola!* 1996) each of these also for the NRLA, realising that this was a space (context and audience) for which we could try new things with impunity. Again, the opportunity for new projects and approaches was there for us at the right time and in different ways this has continued to be the case, in the sense that NRLA has continued as a space in which we've had chance to experiment and to reflect, as well as presenting existing works. In later years I made a solo – *In The Event*, 2004 – which looked back on the 20 years of Forced Entertainment's work and presented it for the first time at NRLA. The same year Forced Entertainment joined with the Chicago based group Goat Island led by Lin Hixson and Matthew Goulish, to collaborate on a presentation for NRLA and Art Institute of Chicago, under the banner *Institute of Failure*. The NRLA was, and remains, a good place to play, in all the serious senses of that word.

The National Review has always been important because it's passionate and idiosyncratic and because it mixes younger artists with more established ones, UK artists with their peers from elsewhere in the world. And I like the ideas. In talks or in the bar The National Review is a place where stuff gets talked about—I mean that alongside debates about the complicated ticketing system or the ardours of queuing or diverse technical problems there will also be talk of art and politics and funding and technologies and ethnicity and writing and gender and what's real and what's not and what matters and what does not and scandalous gossip and the latest news of course on who is sick and who is dead and who is in love and who finally left the country.

It's a long story that NRLA and there's bound to be death in it. I'm thinking specifically for about Steve Rogers who back in the 1980's was editor of *Performance Magazine*, and who I'm sure I met for the first time at the National Review, probably in Nottingham version. *Performance* at that point was a completely wonderful fanzine – a labour of Steve's love more than anything and his energy, his passion for different artists ran through its pages, heading out in all directions. He encouraged me to write. I remember getting the news of Steve's death in 1986, on the telephone at 388 City Road, taking a moment to think the news through in the dark of the hallway, then stepping through to the living room to tell the rest of FE.

It's a long story like I said, there is bound to be death in it. I'm thinking of specifically of Paul Burwell, who as part of Beau Gamelan (with Anne Beam and Richard Wilson) made some of the most beautiful and strange music I ever heard on an orchestra of hybridised vacuum cleaners, fans, oil drums and no one knew what – filling the room (in Glasgow perhaps or maybe Nottingham, the cities have blurred) with sculpted noise, driving out or calling forth demons that I never knew existed until that moment when they shivered there and uncoiled in the dry ice and the heat of bastardised three-bar electrical fires. Paul died in 2007.

Why am I even talking about death?

I am remembering for myself (as if I needed a reminder) that this world is fragile – that the time we have in it, the encounters we have with people and with art, are a privilege, a gift that should not be taken for granted. It goes, can vanish, can be taken away; can be carted off by politics, circumstances, bad luck, swept off by the tide, and traffic and time and all that.

Alistair stood there waiting and waiting in the dark gallery, whispering in amongst the damp earth and dead trees. A strong work that burns so vividly out from the past, as so many fragments from the NRLA do.

And of course it is not the smell of that performance I still have in my head. The thing I carry with me, even now, is its marvellous disquiet. Its disturbance of my ordinary. Its made-me-think-again-ness. Its pit of questions. Its everyday made strange.

I think that the National Review of Live Art has long been about that disquiet, has long sought that disquiet and has long been a champion of that disquiet. I love it for that and for many other reasons.

It is another century than when this story started for me. I am wishing that you (and the National Review) have a long long, continued and happy life of permanent disquiet, a pit of questions and a steady hand on the trigger.

Phasers on stun. The tricorder readings say there is life in the building.

Here's to 30 more.

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So, here we are then, precariously balanced on the edge of the world looking in. There is no point in grasping at what was, for ever, it is time to jump and seek new challenges, to fly outside the box – because we can.