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PERFORMANCE

special **50**th issue

THE CITY AND ITS DOUBLE



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This year the Nottingham born National Review of Live Art moved into London for one time only. The move permitted a wider range of events, and resulted in a very different kind of audience to previous years. But the move had its bad side too. STEVE ROGERS attempts an assessment.

THE MOVE FROM Nottingham to London highlighted some of the problems of the National Review of Live Art. First though on the plus side the larger venue of Riverside Studios resulted in more than 1300 tickets being sold over the four day event. Riverside's bar had rarely looked so packed, the cafe ran out of everything by Saturday lunchtime, and by Saturday night the atmosphere came to resemble the closing stages of a mega birthday party with tired revelers slumped in every available corner.

The move to London also offered a number of well-established British artists a rare opportunity to have their work seen in a high profile London venue with capacity audiences. The festival was as well thought out and well managed as could reasonably be expected given the usual limitations of resources and the ambitious attempt to stage some 50 or so separate events in four days. Unreserved congratulations are definitely in order for both Nikki Millican the director, Neil Bartlett the loquacious MC, Steve Littman, organiser of the video events and documentor of the whole show, and Riverside's staff and technicians.

The minuses of the move to London are somewhat harder to define. Perhaps the biggest minus was the metropolitan audience. What in Nottingham had seemed a celebration of diversity in here seemed liked incoherence. The general overall standard of the platform performances seemed lower than before. But most significant of all, the general assumption that all artists that work in this ill defined area of live art also share the same aims and attitudes was seen to be very far from the truth. I put all this down to the London atmosphere and audience. There's less tolerance and less willingness to be generous. There is greater sense of competition with artists feeling they need to protect their little bit of turf. Also, the simple fact that a large part of what might be called the 'professional audience', that is other artists, administrators, funders and critics, live in London and because they could all go home at the end of each day, there was less of a sense of commitment to the festival and its ideals than in Nottingham where the same 'professional audience' was there solely for the festival and were not distracted by having lives to live.

It was at the festival's Banquet Debate that the lines of division within this amorphous group of people were shown up most clearly. The speaker at the debate was to have been Dutch artist, Franklin Aalders. On the previous day he had given a 'talk' which had included the showing of a video which many members of the audience had found deeply offensive, to the extent that one person, acting as the executor of the offended group, had turned the tape off. Franklin Aalders took deep exception to this intervention and left the festival and did not therefore speak at the banquet. His absence and its cause resulted in what became a quite bitter argument. On the one hand there were those who wanted to defend the right of the artist to use whatever material s/he chooses in whatever way. In opposition to this were those who felt that the issue was not a simple black and white, censor or not censor, debate. They argued that it was more complex and that art

must be seen as coming out of and being seen in a social context. I don't believe it was any accident that all the people who voiced their support for Franklin Aalders were men and that many of those who opposed his showing of the tape were women. This conflict of attitudes opened the way for a discussion, which lack of time and the weather prevented, of the whole mythology of the individual artist-hero working alone against a hostile world.

However, the argument appeared again in a later open discussion about the festival with a panel of women artists. Here the same issues were raised in the form of that hoary old chestnut of the differences between performance art and theatre. All these debates must be resolved into the one really fundamental question which is 'what is this art for?', what is its function and its purpose? These kind of short unstructured debates are not conducive to tackling this question directly and all too often, as here, the time is taken up skirting the issue without ever getting down to the nitty-gritty.

These debates were however extremely useful in that they made the divisions extremely clear and perhaps against this background the real debate can commence without the miasma of pretence that all 'performance' work has the same goal in mind.

As to the art itself. The sheer volume of the festival programme and the limitations of space here prevent any in depth discussion of any of the work. I have chosen to focus on the platform artists since the platform is still the real heart of the festival and because most of the commissioned and invited artists taking part are frequently found in the pages of *Performance*. I apologise to those artists I have not discussed and to those I have for the brevity of my remarks.

The platform opened with John Jordan's *Icarus*. Jordan was one of the few artists in the platform who clearly had an understanding of the traditions within which he is working and it was as a result one of the most clear and successful of all the festival events. Entering the space you are greeted by a powerful smell of burnt feathers and the environment was filled with feathers. The performance involved a search for meaning in the feathers as well as an exploration of the feathers as a material for art. It was a simple, effective piece deeply rooted in the tradition of the artists body in relation to the chosen medium and materials. This is an artist who knows what he's doing and why he's doing it.

Inside Pocket, by contrast, are two women whose work also falls clearly within a tradition, that of Visual Theatre, English style, but they seemed little aware of this. Visual Theatre has lost favour in recent years possibly as a result of some of the techniques it pioneered being taken up in a big way by the more adventurous mainstream producing houses. However the freshness and evident commitment of these two artists demonstrated that there is life in the old dog yet. It had a lyrical, dreamlike quality as one of the women slept on a bed of light, her body silhouetted, as a source of memories, and the protection and desire of the other woman as she carries out a series of task-oriented actions around the sleeping form. With a sharper grasp

of theatre technology and a harder edge to their images Inside Pocket could rejuvenate a seemingly dying form.

The most traditionally theatrical performance of the platform was Martin Aubrey's vaunted *A Portrait of Salvador Dali*. It was also one of the least satisfactory. The large set was totally underused, the Dali moustache wouldn't stay stuck, the artists model couldn't help giggling and the text didn't come even close to revealing anything about Dali you didn't already know. This is the kind of one person show that most reasonably capable actors have in their repertoire to get British Council tours of the Commonwealth. It didn't belong here.

I have written about Dianne Esquerre and Keith Khan's *Images From Purdah* before (*Performance* 45) and as before I found their attempt to blend a purely image based performance style with declamatory acting and cabaret intriguing but unsuccessful. The work has changed in the year since I first saw it and has become more elaborate with the inclusion of a third performer who serves as Islamic wife in Yashmak, Klu Klux Klansman and finally as bal-ladeering cowboy. As before I found the complex series of role transformation between the two central performers, articulated through brilliantly conceived adaptable costumes, beautiful and eloquent. The additional material seemed to encumber the performance with over-elaborations of themes and ideas that are totally clear from the images alone.

Theatre was actually not much in evidence in the platform although theatricality was there in abundance. Julian White and Michael Hurst's sharp, style-conscious agit-prop as totally theatrical and one of the high points of the platform. Using video, projected images, loud music and a central, almost static performance the work amounted to the kind of unpretentious, rhetorical, sloganeering that would work extremely well in a rock club to a visually astute but artistically uninitiated mass audience. It could stand its ground between the comedian and the heavy metal band without any sense of condescension or compromise. It was also one of the surprisingly few, overtly campaigning, political works in the festival.

Another issued based performance was Sally Dawson's *She Wears Sea Shells*. Her demonstration of the exploitation and oppression involved in the appropriation of the artifacts of other, mostly non-western, cultures started out well. A series of large projections of beautiful fabrics drawn from around the world produced the effect of both pleasure and a desire to have these things. The images changed into images of the abuse of these fabrics in their incorporation into high street fashion. Finally the performance disintegrated into a poorly articulated unadorned punchline. The final overstatement of the message destroyed the effect of the subtly ironic use of seduction at the start of the performance which was far more persuasive than the sledgehammer at the end.

Etheldreda ably demonstrated that you don't have to use body blows to be either politically effective or accessible. With no props, no set and no clever technical tricks they produced an articulate series of ironic images of the English