

# Oi! Millican! No!

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THE NATIONAL REVIEW of Live Art made a welcome, if unscheduled return to Glasgow in late October/ November 96. The event had been planned for elsewhere, but due to problems with the venue or funding, the honour fell to Glasgow. The venues which filled the gap at fairly short notice: The Arches, Bar 10, The Old Fruitmarket, Glasgow School of Art, Tramway, The CCA and the GFT are to be lauded.

That's most of the lauding done for the moment. Firstly, a funny thing which happened on the way to the 'theatre'. This writer made his long anticipated and scheduled visit on the 1st of November. Variant had arranged for press passes for the last three days, to be left in his name at the box office of the Arches, the main venue. Having come from beyond Oban he presented himself at the booth, but there seemed to have been some kind of mistake—there were no tickets under that name, nor 'Variant'. The supervisor knew nothing either, but went off to find a man-who-did. Muggins is left throwing glances at the ceiling but batting them down with his eyebrows. "Huh! Administration, eh?" "Aye", says the doorman. "No", said the man-who-knew, who'd appeared in the lobby beside them. There was no mistake or administrative error, there were no tickets for him, and no entry without them. He acknowledged though, that arrangements had been made with New Moves, the organisers, but went on:

"Since the arrangements had been made, the director, Nikki Millican has reconsidered and has decided to withdraw the offer of complementary tickets because of difficulties she has with Variant's editorial policy."

While his gast was being thus flabbered, salient points jockeyed for position:

(a) What had Variant's editorial policy to do with any of its contributors?

(b) Might she not have informed Variant and the writer, saving him a journey?

(c) You tell me this?

Fully flabbered, he ventured to remark that since he had come so far he was going to write something, and so far it could only be about this encounter. The man-who-knew shrugged. Point (a), he said, was nothing to do with him, he was only following instructions. point (b) was regrettable, but was nothing to do with him. On point(c), however, he was only following instructions—but it did seem regrettable. The writer must understand that the man-who-knew had no leeway. He agreed that it was ironic that the locally based organisation's local/national event was not to be covered by the local/national art magazine, but see answers (a), (b), (c).

Unaccountably getting miffed now, he took the writer down a peg or two by revealing that, so tight were the restrictions on tickets that even the artists had to have them, so who was he to be treated so differently? The man-who-knew wouldn't clarify whether they paid for them, as implied, or if (as it turned out), artists were given tickets for the benefit of temporary staff who might not recognise them. At any rate, he rendered the matter redundant with his clincher, a fine example of the appeal to obscurity:

"Youse are a quarterly, anyway. By the time youse come out the event is over. That's no good to us."

It was pointed out that the 're' in review admitted as much, though the conclusion was specious. A 'pre-view,' to clear up the misunderstanding, was what Variant had published for the benefit of the NRLA in the previous issue of the magazine—but the man-who-knew was resolute. Nothing could be done; he was

bound by standing orders.

With impeccable timing the writer's name was called and a hand descended onto his shoulder. Not the doorman but the Polish artist and curator Wladyslaw Kazmierczak, with whom he has worked in the past and plans to again in the coming year. They hug and do the 'It's good to see ya' bit, then he asks: "Are you coming in to see my performance?" "Eh, apparently not, Wladyk; they don't like the editorial policy of the magazine the review would be for, so they are renegeing on their promise of press tickets." The man-who-knew lived up to his moniker by here interjecting that, there was just a possibility that maybe a ticket might be found, which would cover the writer just for this evening, he understood?

Well understood, at least, is how the cover of the gloom of anonymity allows us to carry out the grubbiest of details unconscionably, actions that might instantly shame us in the light of day. For 'light of day' read 'witnessed by East European artist of international standing who is familiar with all the forms that censorship and repression can take.' But all that is besides the point, if close to the bone.

In order to better comprehend New Moves' old move, the writer has been trawling through old Variant editorials in a search for the bogeyman. Could it be this, from the re-launch issue?

"We have resurfaced at a crucial yet not altogether unfamiliar point, which in the interim period of our absence has witnessed this tendency to openly and routinely consign independent and critical voices to silence, developed into something like policy... It is our perception that the current climate seeks to stifle any deviation from the cultural packaging and re-packaging of a benign culture of entertainment."

Or could it be this older bugbear?

"Variant is not concerned with providing the 'institutional' art machine with an approving image of itself...For the establishment of a critical, engaging and diverse culture, lateral links have to be made across media, and opinions need to be expressed and exposed." (Vol. 1 No.16)

Radical stuff indeed. It amounts to a condonation of individual thought and an espousal of free speech. Of course, New Moves objections may well lie elsewhere, and in the interests of free speech and open debate the editors wrote to Nikki Millican (7/11/96), inviting her to outline her objections to Variant's editorial policy, and to explain why the NRLA needed protecting from it, but three months later she has neither replied, declined or acknowledged the letter.

Clearly, her discomfort did not predate or prevent her from supplying the information for the preview of the NRLA in the last issue, or indeed the original promise of press tickets. Her position is untenable, hence the deafening silence. In that silence something doesn't ring true—the adoption of sudden and vehement positions without precedence or context is enough to send the average amateur detective to scurry in search of the coercive element. But who could coerce the underfunded New Moves? It's a poser, isn't it?

The aim of a 'national' review is presumably to bring its purview before the widest audience, exposing them to the gamut of current practice. That aim is compromised somewhat in an eleven day event when day tickets are £6 (£4). Leaving aside the qualms many performance artists might have with the notion of anyone paying to witness their work, some seventy people had done so that evening. It would seem, in the naive world the writer inhabits, that if that were the average

attendance, then £5,000 in extra funding or a re-allocation of the existing budget, would have enabled the setting of nominal prices that would have allowed more people to visit the review, and to see more events.

Any serial event that suffers itself to hang on the tenterhooks of fundraising applications throughout the year followed by eleven days being flogged with a shoestring budget is in the process of undermining itself. More than one artist later remarked that the paucity of the materials and equipment budget forced them to curtail their intentions. Okay, that's the real world. But their wants were not extraordinary, and the object of the lesson can hardly be to give artists a lesson in penury or to present a distorted view of their work. One does not get more quality by stretching what one already has; on the contrary.

When the term 'national' is appended to an event it presupposes a commitment to enable an appropriate level of presentation that does justice to the claim; that demands a consensus in the first place that the event in some way represents the 'nation' in its field, in which case the 'nation' finds the funding, presumably. All that a shoestring can do is get tied in knots - but as we tie them ourselves we think of them as bows. In today's management structure such skills are, without a trace of irony, thought of as adding another string to one's bow. The shoestring budget is the marginalizing element *par excellence*, the classic technique for booting to the sidelines, from where one's laces can be tied together with impunity.

The notion of a national event has other corollaries. One of the expected functions is to serve in a definitive role, an invidious task in a medium whose practitioners have yet to define to their own satisfaction. To judge by the evenings events and the programme (needs must), much of the work could be characterised as quasi-theatrical, and some of it not so quasi-. The blurring of performance art/theatrical parameters is considered a cardinal error by most theorists and practitioners. Commenting on the 9th Cracow Meeting of 1981, Jerzy Hanusek noted that reproaches against theatricality were uttered virtually exclusively against foreign artists, saying that, even though they had all emerged from alternative circles which have remained in opposition to the commercial art market, "the proximity of this market did, however, seem to cast its shadow, in the form of the greater care for the spectacle aspect, which is as much as to say the saleable attractiveness of the actions."<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that performance borrows thespian techniques—indeed, Klaus Groh asserts that "performance art is life, portrayed by using methods and systems derived from theatre,"<sup>2</sup> but we must remember that theatre is life, portrayed by using methods and systems derived from life. It seems, to blur rhetorical parameters a moment, that we are in danger of counting our chickens before they hatch, or our eggs before they are laid, and in any case, the one that comes first gets to play in the road.

If performance art is to be considered a distinct medium (which the writer thinks it is), it must qualify its distinction by delineating its boundaries and scope. What does 'live' refer to in live art? If it is only to the presence of the artist it becomes spurious, if not trite. If it pertains to the immediacy of the work, it shares the epithet with breakfast television. If it refers to the intensity of the action, doubt also appears—as Hanusek put it at the 10th Cracow Meeting (1995), "a bad performance can be more dead than a good picture."<sup>3</sup> He prefers to think in terms of 'direct action'.

Action he sees as direct when the receiver is not aware of the presence of an intervening media, or in which that presence is of little significance. When one's activities are governed by such a subtle line, and if one's means are blocked in with such a wide brush, little wonder that the results can be equivocal and belaboured. And suspension of disbelief has no part here—performance art/direct action doesn't have an audience really, rather it has witnesses to the action. All that a witness need bring is their full sensibility, and in these circumstances, artifice glows in the lime-light as well as in the dark.

Some find these terminological efforts tedious but nomenclature must be defined if analysis or assessment is to be applied; as it must if the medium is to orientate itself amongst other media. The reluctance to resolve these issues has its result in a general unwillingness to judge performance. If anything goes, art will surely take advantage of the out, and artists will follow. When everything is valid, banality and egotism are legitimated, with the usual vapid results. To countermand this tendency, Hanusek posits a concept of performance art as 'work' in a way that functions as a memento-art, and a fundamental point of reference: "The moment when this concept disappears beyond the horizon of thought—this may be from a macro- or micro-perspective, that is, when thought is bogged down in details, or becomes too general—that is the moment when we leave the area of art."<sup>4</sup> A man who doesn't need reminding is Polish artist Jerzy Berés, who has the definitive word on this reluctance to judge, a defect that he sees as not confined to the field of aesthetics:

"The prolongation of the suspension of judgement is, after all, an attempt to stop, or at least retard, the course of history. And this is the fundamental factor distorting the reality of the 20th century, which has perhaps prematurely been labelled an age of astounding progress, which is supposed to make humanity happy. It is perhaps this very model of life made easier, a model promulgated by the advertising and propaganda machines which has brought about the general consent to the lack of judgement. For judgement entails rather the 'difficulty of existence'"<sup>5</sup>

Berés, who makes sculpture and 'manifestations' (the latter sometimes serving to sacralize the former)

is the most uncompromising of artists who has been irking authority (political and artistic) and subverting expectations before, during and after Poland's period of totalitarianism and martial law. The creative act he sees as the result of an independent attitude to reality. Such a unique attitude brings with it an enforced responsibility for one's actions that is not negotiable. The crux of independence rules that the creative fact - the tangible trace of a creative act - is not intended to fulfil society's general expectations, though it occasionally does so by common coincidence. Far more likely is that the creative fact will serve to irritate and unsettle the collective 'self-satisfaction'. This is not its primary aim but a side effect, and it is not politically motivated (though it can be). Berés says he is not a political artist, he is merely "interested in more than one dimension of art."<sup>6</sup>

The plot, or more accurately 'culture of complicity', thickens when we recognise that events like the NRLA tends to be funded by quangos and agencies of whom it would not be unfair to suggest that they share a certain collective self-satisfaction, to the extent that we have not become weary of the constant re-evaluations of their mandates and their self-criticising zeal. And these agencies seem to be calling for creative efforts to be 'populist', not 'highbrow', because they have a responsibility to the people. To be populist is to have integrity; to be highbrow is to be suspect. What a quasi-world it is we are living in.

The trouble is that in a culture of self-satisfaction and complicity, being sure of the roots of our philosophical thought may be more difficult than we think. Most thinkers think themselves models of objectivity, but few can say that they have examined and are conscious of their base assumptions, which define their attitudes. Those base assumptions are secreted deep within received wisdom—we are exposed to them at a point in our development when we are incapable of cognizing their ad hoc nature. Cognized, assumptions act according to their nature as starting blocks. Unrecognised, they are stumbling blocks (and can be picked up and used as blinkers).

There are signs that artists are becoming aware of the natural environment for their actions. Berés likens it to animals escaping from the zoo - not all will prefer the vitality of freedom. "Those who have grown accustomed to the cages, to the runs of superficial freedom, to the generous patronage of their feeders, and to the

public, staring through the bars, will remain to live out their days there."<sup>7</sup> Too often—i.e. not always—watching the artist in a gallery situation is like watching a seal with a ball balanced on its nose; when art is reduced to popular entertainment even its ludic functions are played out.

So what, then, is the function of a national review of live art? As the writer has examined three of the terms to date, he may as well confess to misgivings about the remaining one—a re-view of live art? All this may be hair splitting but sometimes the hair gets to be exhibit A. The insignificant attains its meaning by tracing its associations with more material facts. Such is the tangled web in this case, that one can only assume that its function is obscurantist. Repeat performance by rote is no more palatable of an event than it is of a performance art.

It is a pity that this article could not cover specific works, for not all of them were done justice by the general remarks - but then, they are unlikely to be in need of the writer's approving image. Of all the works he *didn't* see, the one he liked best was Alexander Harvey's 'Holding Together.' Harvey went out onto the streets each day and built sand castles; and no one needed to ask why. More than seventy saw the action, which was free. Its simplicity would have been as eloquent anywhere else in the world, which is no mean feat. Now that is a view of Live Art.

<sup>1</sup> Jerzy Hanusek, 'Cracow Meetings with an Eight Year Epilogue,' in 'Spotkania Krakowskie' (1995, BWA Contemporary Gallery of Art, Krakow, p115.

<sup>2</sup> Klaus Groh, 'Teoretyczna idea sztuki performance,' in Performance, a collective work (Warsaw: MAW, 1984), p61.

<sup>3</sup> Jerzy Hanusek, op cit.

<sup>4</sup> Jerzy Hanusek, p112

<sup>5</sup> Jerzy Berés, 'The Work as a Stimulator of Judgement', Spotkania Krakowskie, BWA Krakow p80.

<sup>6</sup> Jerzy Berés, 'Zwidy, wyrocznie, oltarze.' (Phantoms, Oracles, Altars.) An Autobiographical sketch) Grupa Krakowska, Cracow 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Andrzej Kostolowski, 'The Giggle of Time', in 'Zwidy Wyrocznie Oltarze Wyznania', Museum Narodowe, Poznan 1995.