

performance

simon Herbert: In 1982, Stephen Cripps fired rockets along wire guides to crash into and explode against wall mounted cymbals. In 1987 George Barbers' videotape showed a line-up of young hopefuls auditioning for *Taxi Driver*, intoning Bobby De Niro's lines "Are you looking at me" ten years after the original film had been released.

In 1984 Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh tied themselves together for a year by an eight foot rope. In 1982 the Hampshire media proclaimed that Mona Hatoum was "Naked in Red Slime" at the Aspects Gallery in Portsmouth. Throughout the decade Alastair MacLennan wandered around various city streets very slowly, with a stocking on his head. Performance magazine was truly a child – albeit a wailing and sleepless one – of the eighties; it was launched in June 1979, on the cusp of decadal change, and folded at the beginning of the nineties. My own experience of it is that it was the key organ for delineating the wonderful and the terrible. In their bastardised form, the words "wonderful" and "terrible" have lost the primal value that they originally were imbued with. "Wonderful" means to be replete with a sense of amazement of life. "Terrible" means a power and beauty that is truly awesome to behold. These were the potential tectonic forces sealed within each bi-monthly issue; attracting all those other angry young aspirant performance artists looking for a fight and the option of gratuitous nudity.

The role and the politics of the magazine – like the artform itself – meant and still mean radically different things to different people. No one person's perspective (and certainly not mine, either as perennial punter or occasional contributor) could be said to be authoritative or definitive – except, maybe, for Rob la Frenais', who, as founder, editor and chief proponent more than any other person embodied the energy and vitality of Performance. His editorial, in issue one, set the tone for the future: "There are still some events worth stifling a yawn for... They are difficult to pin down... to separate from the sludge of spectacle... they consist of people doing odd things in front of others. They are performances. Anyone can do one but once money changes hands their value is again under scrutiny. Sometimes they become theatre, and people sit down and get up and have drinks and sit down and clap and get up again. The performances we cover have been called fringe theatre, performance art and community art. We are responding to, and adding to, a vastly increased interest in these things, but we will be critical in our approach."

A magazine that would respond then, to the work of our time. At a time when live art was still enjoying the momentum generated by its mainstream adoption by the American visual art brigade in the seventies, at a time when public bodies such as the Arts Council was agonising over how to respond to funding demands from a bunch of respected artists who looked like extras from a Ken Russell movie, at a time when community art was at its height in terms of hippy pageantry; never was so much wicker and cheesecloth sacrificed in the search for meaningful communal congress. As the magazine evolved it had to navigate the icebergs of changing funding patterns, new feminist practice, the rise of multi-culturalism in a country which was not at the time so responsive to visible examples of hybridity and a thousand other submerged flash points.

Whilst there is no doubt that Performance craved new icebergs to crash its hull into, to monitor the compaction of snow and wailing bodies thrown from the decks and count the cost later, the idea that a series of unrelated activities, often emanating from social theories of cultural practice that were, to all intents and purposes, often oppositional to one another, implied a certain combustibility.

The resources of Performance magazine were few, and relied on the enthusiasm of contributors who were willing to submit articles without substantial "journalistic" recompense, comprised of acolytes, devotees and believers. It was not uncommon for the power relationships to shift from one issue to the next; within a small gene pool a writer would lay forth on issues of cultural decrepitude with all the authority of the chosen, only to be reviewed by another voice in the next issue, and write a letter of complaint in the following issue about how said reviewer did not understand their work in an intelligent and informed manner. Lack of travel funds meant that the magazine was often reliant on identifying contributors on the basis of their perceptive excellence and geographical proximity to a particular event in equal measures.

In many ways this status reflected the journal's mission statement of a rejection of the perceived "centre" – or at least, an avowed intent to examine the distances between generic concepts of the radical and the mainstream. The editors of Performance were privy to both the visceral experience of sitting on concrete floors witnessing confrontational actions in warehouses at two in the morning, and the cultural debate which swirled around the public funding system in board rooms.

The mainstream, as such, was not the enemy. Many of the articles printed analysed work which was made within the realms of high art and theatre. Major cross-media projects by Robert Wilson, La Furas del Baus, John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Tzadeus Kantor were reported in editorial proximity to

community art initiatives in mental institutions, or the individual performances of practitioners operating on the funding margins. For all its iconoclasm and irreverence, Performance was a deeply earnest magazine. Its constant retort was that the art forms it represented suffered from a lack of mainstream recognition and, more importantly, funding. This in itself was a double-edged sword that none of the editors pricked their fingers on; the capacity to cackle at the prospect of anarchy in one breath whilst simultaneously bemoan a lack of popular support. Performance seemed to be a bouncer standing guard at a party that one was either disdainfully excluded from or welcomed into with a chuckle of recognition. Artists probably believed that funding officers were surreptitiously reading copies of the magazine disguised between the covers of *Art In America*, brows furrowing as they attempted to second guess which proposals would be ejected from this miasma to land for bloody consideration on their desks.

When the Franchise Promoters Scheme was introduced at the Arts Council in 1985 (a scheme to enable a variety of regionally-based promoters to commission performance works under a national, monitored initiative), coupled with a parallel "Glory of the Garden" scheme (in which funds were made available for municipal funding institutions) many city galleries unused to presenting the work of any living artist outside of the annual rote of watercolour opens would find themselves enlisting the aid of health and safety officials to pour cold water on the aspirations of nude confrontational performance artists brandishing buckets of ammonia under the unexpectant noses of the casual gallery visitor.

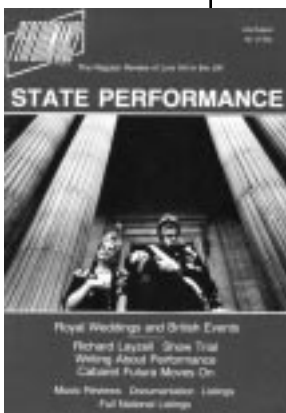
Faced with such developments Performance continued to po-facedly monitor the allocations of funding to performance art forms whilst continuing to mock the ambitions of its constituency with a series of provocative articles. Both a gadfly to the establishment and an agent provocateur to its own indigenous camp, a cursory examination of any individual issue afforded a picture of mixed issues, cultures and disciplines. There was much grandstanding and slumming, dense columns of text replete with hit signifiers such as Bataille, Psychik TV, Crowley and Rosenthal, vying with blurred and grainy photographs of bohemians, naked women with breasts painted in corn circle swirls, bald men with foreign objects up their asses, immaculately fuckable ice maidens with skirts lifted above their muscular thighs, middle-aged men screaming nonsense poetry with pints spilling from thrust glasses, inscrutable asians stood in fields of translucent flour, anally-retentive men with horn rims striding purposefully in front of their own magnified shadows, grinning women shimmying a lantern rictus as bemused parents and children looked on, protected by the envelope of audience and a particularly bright autumnal light.

Certain personalities became visible through repetition: the Stuart Brisleys and Chris Burdens, primal figures in performance art mythology, slippery and lucid both in photographic reproduction and textual response: Silvia Ziranek and Laurie Anderson, cover girls from an alternative "Hello" magazine, issuing homespun observations and willfully obscure aphorisms: Andre Stitt, charted from his mid-twenties to his mid-thirties in a series of pictures that always seemed to see him encrusted with either vomit, or ketchup, or both.

The evolution of any particular magazine can be partially discerned through changes in production values – which Performance magazine did incorporate; as a ten year old organ it advanced from its semi-Gestetner origins to become a full blown glossy black and white. In Issue 25 Rob la Frenais wrote that —

"When it comes to the crunch, even the most radical live artists have been known to dive for the safe cover of established art theory to justify their acts; likewise those on the theatre fringe have diluted experiment for the new pragmatism that requires big audiences at all costs; full houses every night with the possibility of TV appearances. We have chosen to remain outside those worlds, in a sense attempting to maintain a holding zone: a safe house in which everyone is welcome, providing they want to take the same risks as we do, sharing our crisis of identity."

This statement seems in retrospect less a shift than a reaffirmation of intent. Earlier issues were already cross-fertilising sources and mix n' matching disparate cultural phenomena. Issue 15, in February 1982 constructed a number of interesting parallels and links between Magical practice and the work of performance artists and theatrical experiment; drawing an elliptical line through Emmy Hennings and Hugo Ball at the Cabaret Voltaire, Aleister Crowley six years later at Caxton Hall, through to the circle jerks and occult posturing of Genesis P.Orridge and Cosi Fanni Tutti.



Notting Hill Carnival was also put under the performance microscope. In a precursor to later times, when artists such as Keith Khan would use the essence of Carnival as the basis of hybrid artistic research, Isobel Appio wrote that:

“Matrons and madonnas, who, the day before worried over specks of dust on their virginal white, now shriek in hysteria and abandon. Wet me. Wet me. Pelvises tilt to catch precious colour, and soak it up... When River has passed, the debris was colourful and colossal. The River people have soaked it up and spewed it forth.”



In the following twenty-five issues Performance magazine continued the task of acting as an informative expanded newsletter for performers and funders alike whilst willfully and voraciously upping the ante in challenging notions of what constituted radical cultural action and meaningful social ritual. Maybe this was the outcome of a certain burn-out that effects many guerrilla operations that have miraculously extended a shelf life beyond their initial enthusiasm and Titanic expectations, resulting in a jaded sensibility dulled by four years of reportage of events from Bracknell to Glasgow, Newcastle and Deptford. The evolution of the magazine reflected the general cycle of inspiration and malaise that effects every artistic community, desperate to retain the former and banish the latter.

The envelope was pushed in a number of different ways, principally by the contention that social conventions and gatherings normally considered as “non-art” could be dragged kicking and screaming into the pages of the magazine. Part affirmation of Joseph Beuys’ oft misquoted truism that everyone could be an artist, part two fingers up to the earnest, Performance magazine was proposing models for the interaction of “Art” and “Life” a decade before the yBa’s were trumpeting a similar tune. In issue 28 the Crufts Dog Show was examined, by Steve Rogers and Mark Stevens as a suitable case for treatment:

“The English obsession with dogs is well known, an integral part of stereotypical English eccentricity... one of the talismanic fetishes of baronial life that still lingers nostalgically in more favoured parts of rural Britain. The rigorous and technically incomprehensible rules of entry, the extraordinary and baffling range of doggy paraphernalia on sale, and the sheer blind passion on the faces of competing breeders confirm that Crufts has a significance far beyond the the paltry £100 Best in Show prize money.”

Substitute a performance artist for a dog, often paid less than £100 a gig, and the parallel become clear. Iwona Blazwick and Chris Rodley similarly wrote about the Ideal Home Show that —

“Looking out of the double glazed windows... we can just see past the romantic woodland clearing where exotic birds bob alongside the glistening polystyrene of discarded hamburger cartons, to our neighbours.” Jeff Koons anybody?

The possibilities for mixing lampoon and serious commentary were endless, and many of these topics have since moved into the mainstream as a source of phenomenological obsession. David Briers, writing in issue 28 in 1984, anticipated the current X-Files and millennial frenzy with an article neatly titled “The Reality Game”, which delved into the murky world of the UFO spotter. Witnesses’ drawings of their memories of contact with supposed alien visitors was accompanied by the sub-heading “Performance Artists from Outer Space?” This “floating margin” meant that Performance magazine never let its constituency forget its position in the greater scheme of things, and further implied that to operate from the margins was essentially an ethical and political stance.

This manifested itself in two ways. Firstly articles on non-art protest and activism relating to the ecological and anti-nuclear movements threaded their way through the history of the magazine. Greenham Common was a flash point returned to on several occasions. Artists such as Richard Layzell who had become heavily involved with eco-activism within their own live work presented articles on the peace movement. In the introductory banner to his “Peace Moves” article, he wrote that: “Images from recent peace protests make performance art look redundant.” And this indeed was the question raised constantly. The magic margin is shifted, and suddenly all the monologists with fish on their head look stupid and narcissistic when faced with a camp of women undertaking a long term protest with no end in sight.

Secondly, in order to instigate dialogue with its audience Performance regularly ran a series of overviews that prompted extended debate in the letters pages of the issues that followed. Roland Miller’s question “Is Performance Art dead?” was revived on numerous occasions to appear Banquo-like at the hedonist feast. Questionnaires intermittently appeared in which artists talked of their influences and desires in response to a series of bullet questions sent out into the ether by the magazine.



The mission of Performance was in part aimed at the funding system, as way of endorsing increased resources for performers. As the magazine evolved over its ten plus years shifts became apparent that reflected the move towards mainstream artworld validation. The English eccentrics such as Forkbeard Fantasy faded into the seventies land of Avalon, sitting on straw bales and disporting themselves in the aspic of documentation. Artists who had started out at the fringe were recorded moving incrementally to the centre. Richard Wilson was still doing his thing, but he was now representing his country in the Apperto section of the 1986 Venice Biennale. Stephen Taylor-Woodrow’s living paintings were breaking attendance records in Southampton City Art Gallery in 1987, before touring to packed houses in New York. Mona Hatoum, no longer Naked In Red Slime, was diversifying her artistic activities on a road that would one day lead to a Turner prize nomination. In issue 46, in 1987, when long time contributor Steve Rogers took over from Rob la Frenais as editor, the cover personality was no less than Anthony D’Offay; a central London commercial gallery dealer, the type of person who would once have decorated dart boards in radical artist’s studios throughout the land. It was perhaps uncomfortable for some to realise that the links between the commercial world and the cutting edge were more comprehensive and fundamental than some romantics would have liked.

This pattern in many ways prefigured a prophesy made flesh and formaldehyde in the current phenomena of the yBa. Performance art on a plinth, Hermann Nitsch in a glass case, genitalia as a kebab, acid house music played by brass bands, intimate confessions made on videotape, the mid-nineties has seen the shocking and the cutting edge appropriated by the private sector as a virtual monopoly. The public sector meanwhile faces the advent of central funding disappearing as lottery money becomes the new funding talisman; ironically, the community art and fringe theatre practice that disappeared from the pages of Performance in the late eighties is probably best placed to take advantage of lottery criteria that favours a generic soup of accessibility and happy smiley participation.

It is curious to ponder what Performance would have made of all this were it still in existence. It would, I suspect, have been torn between interrogating the yBa phenomenon and scorning it; between building up the possibilities of lottery funds for practitioners whilst simultaneously decrying the narrowness of its cultural parameters.

The death of Steve Rogers in 1988, only eleven issues after he took over the editorial reins from founder and long term mentor Rob la Frenais, sent the magazine into a tailspin. His death was sudden and unexpected, highlighted by the fact that he was simultaneously credited as Editor of Issues 56/7 whilst on the facing page one could read his obituary. A sweet and gifted man, Steve would doubtless have appreciated the irony.

New editor Gray Watson’s editorship began with an overhaul in design, format and content: with regard to the latter the focus shifted to a seemingly more academic stance. A recent examination of these later issues reveals that the content was not as academic as might have appeared at the time – maybe just hobbled by a more orthodox design – but a perception that the “feel” was altogether different remains. By the time the magazine was winding down the scattergun review pages had been replaced with a more orderly section, which curiously began with the coda that events would be “reviewed geographically, starting with London, followed by the other regions.” The party, for me at least, was over.

Do we need a Performance magazine in the late nineties? There is ample evidence that performance art as it was known is going through a low point in terms of activity and support. The desire for partially-controlled authenticity – of staring back at a bloodied maniac on a winter’s night as the breath steams from both your mouths – has abated over the last ten years as younger practitioners encode seductive replays on digital tape and pixel dots – virtual reality headsets run confrontations again and again between the viewer and electronic leviathans. Do either audiences or artists want or need to be active in the peculiar way that performance art encompassed?

The only surety is that, as the guerrilla mechanics pronounce the virility of, say, the web, another group will decry its sterility. Form and content will remain central to any and all humanistic – if elitist and clinically insane – art practice. The job of prediction and disruption will still need to be done. In this respect issue 12 of Performance magazine, in July 1981, retains a cogent message for all art soothsayers Jung and Old. Lynne McRitchie, analysing the “state performance” of the Royal Family, wrote that —

“ Prince Charles and Lady Diana will have every opportunity to be happy – security, money, homes, time, space and endless love, given by subjects who need to believe in what the royal couple represent. For the rest of us such security is surely impossible. The daily grind wears us out and makes us tired. We are not nineteen and don’t wear diamonds.”

Look upon my works all ye mighty, and despair.