

# The Challenge of Black Market International

## The National Review of Live Art 2007, Tramway, Glasgow

From Wednesday 7th February to Sunday 11th February 2007, Black Market International (BMI) artists achieved a new challenge. Invited by Nikki Milican, Director of the National Review of Live Art in Glasgow, who put together 80 live art artists and where BMI would perform for five consecutive days. As such, over these five days, the various stakeholders (among whom we can quote guests such as Brian Connolly, Esther Ferrer, Jamie McMurry, Alexander Del Re, Monica Klinger, and regretting non-attendance of Norbert Klassen and Marco Teubner) would take over the vast space of Tramway 2. The programme also included an all-day workshop for twenty students, as well as to documentaries and solo readings. These five days managed to mobilise a great audience, mostly young, to follow the actions of Jürgen Fritz (D), Myriam Laplante (It/Qu), Alastair MacLennan (Northern Ireland), Helge Meyer (D), Boris Nieslony (D), Elvira Santamaria (Mx), Julie-Andrée Tremblay (Québec), Roi Vaara (Fi), Jacques Van Poppel (NL), Lee Wen (Si/J).

## ACT 1: Becoming Aware of the Territory

On the first night, Black Market drags us into extremely poetic actions and proves to us the power of that open system. Little by little, they appropriate the space. The artists demonstrate how very little things end up being the central idea of an important work of art. They do not make art, they are art. Various objects lie in the massive room and accessories which will be used by performers are aligned on a big table. At first glance, a car wreck, a twisted bicycle and a rusty motorbike, two beds on casters, a giant stepladder, a stone hung from the rafters and a pile of peanuts, as well as a large greenhouse, are the stage setting; an orchestrated chaos in a way. But the two recent x-rays hung up at eye level as works of art, are obviously the signs of Roi Vaara's recent wrist fracture. Having fallen off a platform whilst in Japan, the artist had an operation on the Saturday prior to his arrival in Glasgow. However, he performed with this strange splint on his right arm from which stems come out of his flesh; he changed his projects a lot, despite the discomfort caused by that burdensome and unusual appliance.

An appearance of Black Market always evokes something 'on the go', whatever its stage of accomplishment may be. A sort of huge building site that gives birth to images - of the moment - with artists sharing a common attitude and where each of them, with full respect to the other, has a major role since there is no hierarchy among them.

The audience comes in and sits around, accepting to follow this journey through its length. Everything seems to be regulated as if BMI had rehearsed, which is not the case since they work in full improvisation. When breathing on a heavy stone, Boris Nieslony gives life to this inert mass, doesn't he? Joined in this action by Helge Meyer and later on by Alastair MacLennan, together for a long while, they reanimate the spirit of that stone - a major element of their decor and performance. It takes time before the vibration turns into an oscillation. But time is a major element in performing art, isn't it? An essential experience for the artist? Time is like an investment and they experience it. The extreme slowness enables relaxation and expression of plenty of emotions, to go through the transformation process more naturally and repetition helps with concentration. Julie Andrée, come out of the pile of peanuts where she seemed to drown, joins Boris, sits on the tip of a chair. Head upside down, she stays for a long time arching her back

under the same stone, staring at it, hypnotic. The performer's balance is weak and so are the bamboo stems she holds in her hands, which she plays with. Much later on, Alastair MacLennan places, very slowly, into her mouth some matches she had previously aligned on the floor. That pas de deux lasts, a partition of time is necessary to understand the games own rules.

Simultaneously, Jürgen Fritz starts the long work of assembling all the bamboo stems together. Bit by bit, we witness the making of a hut of sorts. Myriam Laplante moves about with a mask upside down on her head, Elvira Santamaria blows bin bags up and places them around the others. Lee Wen, lying on a bed covered with the rusty cycle, is wandered around by some of the participants. Roi Vaara writes on a wall a text he received concerning the risk assessment of his performance. Performance artists are not used to such documents due to new UK safety standards. And it is not fortuitous that it is the one who had an accident who, not without humour, writes it. As for Jacques Van Poppel, he quietly sets up his camp, builds his tent, his beer bottles and all the accessories evoking the perfect tourist in the middle of that assembly he regularly disturbs. And to end this first day, the artists do a slow dance on a tune duly chosen by the latter.

## **ACT 2: The Workshop**

The second day is dedicated to a workshop for students. An artist from London, Tom Greghegan was one who signed up for this workshop; he considers himself as a 'learner' and attends BMI's European interventions on a regular basis; this is also the case for a young artist Sarah Jane Grimshaw, who graduated from Deborah Richardson-Webb's Contemporary Theatre Practise course in Glasgow. The students come from Glasgow, London and also from Germany. They all feel a little bit tentative. Everyone introduces him/herself. They have to do some exercises suggested by each member of Black Market International before they each show their own work for no longer than ten minutes. Finally, from 7.30pm onwards, they will all take part in a collective performance. It is still to be decided whether this course should be opened to initiates only, or to a broader audience and from what time during the day. Fortunately, the second option finally got the upper hand. No matter if the real number of votes was not really taken into account!

The body obviously becomes the centre of this taught programme. Everyone choose their own exercise. Helge Meyer insists on awareness and its possibilities, how to develop a proper understanding of our body and how to avoid putting it in danger. He then asks everyone to choose and stare at one part of the body for two or three minutes and then, three by three, to put this into action in front of the others. There is no surprise about his choice since we remember that when he was in Slovakia in 2002, his performance with Marco Teubner ended very badly when Marco cut off one of his phalanx between a couple of stones.

Jürgen Fritz asks eight trainees to imagine sitting on a jumping horse, to change their way of standing in the space, to try and escape from themselves, first individually and then back to back in couples. This exhausting work on resistance forces them to create their own space within the others, to focus on breathing and to control energy.

Julie Andrée works on concentration skills by asking them to use space two by two. A stick balanced between two parts of the body, by shifting it she makes them move in a sort of 'macro-move', making them conscious of what it changes in the situation. Alastair MacLennan insists on

the idea of continuation. He makes them all fit into a very tiny space and asks them to keep on moving; to be the move without thinking of what they are doing; to move about slowly as a fish would do in the water. Nothing else. Only to focus on the moving parts of their bodies.

Lee Wen asks them to keep the movement but to hold a posture, like in yoga. Students stand around in a circle, everyone picks up an object on the table and has to imagine a series of postures using the selected object.

Boris Nieslony did a very tiny action at the beginning of the workshop, back against the wall, in which he mixed up voice (with incomprehensible intonations) and moves (with vague gestures). As a ritual, he asks a student to repeat his piece, with possible help from other students. Yes indeed, memory is also a part of the body and forces the unlucky one who has been chosen to search in his memories and to merge his/her own perception of this enigmatic act! He transcribes it in a rather funny way - a hard task for which he is applauded!

Jacques Van Poppel, in order to use the same part of the body, creates a football team, each one having to head the ball and give it back to him. The work then presented by each student reveals that they are already significantly involved in the art of performing. In the UK and Germany several schools teach this discipline, unlike most European countries. It is thus, with a real pleasure, that we discover some very relevant ideas of these young, future artists. Various themes were brought up; beautiful energy and strong concentration animated their personal work. And this is very promising.

Black Market analyses each of them and sometimes asks them the reason why they chose this action. It turns out that whilst working together we have to create our own image and be aware of the others' work at the same time. Nobody must monopolize the attention, this is an exchange made in harmony. Learning how to be responsible towards others and gently transform actions, to leave space for another possibility. Even if everything is possible with an object, we must stay fluid and adaptable and learn in a respectful way (respect - a word that occurs very often here). Making a sort of theatre where the audience comes and takes part is out of question. They are preparing tonight's performance, which is a unique experience for everyone. But unfortunately they do not perform all together as 30 people in the space as it would not meet the security standards, added to which, the noise sometimes coming from the two rooms next door disturbs Black Market. Borders between institution and artist are often incompatible!

That night the performances go pretty well, everyone finds his/her own role and place during their action. But an artist coming from outside has curiously joined the group, unable to control her emotions she disturbs the global harmony of the action. This is also a risk. By simple actions, students are perfectly complementary with the artists, each one taking care of erasing themselves to hand over to the other.

**ACT 3: Documentaries, intervention 'in the Norbert Klassen way' and for the première, Lee Wen claims the word 'EVERYBODY'**

Alastair MacLennan opens the festivities from 12-noon with 'Gale Lip Pillage'. His head in a plastic bag, he looks at a projection of images pointing out various kinds of extreme pollutions. Does

performance not act as a counterweight in a society ruled by over-consumption and, unfortunately, with all the damage that goes along with it?

Norbert Klassen was not here and Boris wanted to pay tribute to him. He starts with quoting the artist 'I've got nothing to tell you but I'm going to tell you anyway' and then he plays dice on a table. But the dice are loaded each side has got three numbers on it! The artists - gathered together around Nieslony - smoke fake cigarettes, calling to mind their friend struck down by pneumonia and who used to chain-smoke during his actions holding a 'No Smoking' sign in his hand.

A film directed by Jürgen Fritz, started in 1997, relates the story of Black Market International and reminds us that this type of moving cooperation - established in 1985 - celebrated its 20 years of existence the year before. Among the seven artists who have been part of it since the very beginning, a couple of them come from theatre - Norbert Klassen and Jürgen Fritz, whilst others come from performance art and visual arts. A few others teach at art schools. As for Jacques Van Poppel, he acts as a troublemaker and will prove it through his actions.

As time went by a few performers left the collective: Thomas Ruller (Czech), Zigmund Piotrowski (Pol), Zbigniew Warpechowski (Pol) and Nigel Rolfe (Ire). Lately, Boris Nieslony - who qualifies as a founder of Black Market International according to a collective decision - has integrated new generations through the admission of two German artists - Marco Teubner and Helge Meyer - as well as the female contingent represented by Elvira Santamaria, Myriam Laplante and Julie Andrée T.

Today, the Irish artist Brian Connolly performs with the group. Action is starting again. Connolly has put a black tent up on which he draws constellations; then he puts on a table a polar bear on an ice field that melts down very quickly. Roi Vaara, as soon as he comes in, gives a 'Left Hand Shake' as a double allusion to his accident which immobilizes his right hand but also to a recent show performed in Sète entitled *Poignée de main fraîche* in which he dipped his hand in a pot of white paint beforehand. Each artist fills the territory with a more or less fleeting/ephemeral action and with an individual story. One image comes after another. A stick balanced on Boris Nieslony's head, a mask screaming with its mouth opened on Lee Wen's. Myriam Laplante - famous for her performances mixing up odd and fantasy - crawls on a gigantic spider web and builds a strange edifice by sticking peanuts together. Julie Andrée and Helge Meyer, blindfolded by a piece of fabric on which is written 'lack of knowledge', sit face to face around a table and establish a ritual using numbers written on some cards. Helge ends up with marks of burnt down candles on his head and with bamboo stems going through his clothes - his body doing its best to move about on the floor like a strange animal. A dialogue is often established between two, three or several artists, each of them joining together in their action or impeding moves by the others. This confusion is part of the work of art and holds the artist in a continuous state of concentration. In total communication, artists use their body as a material; they feel free and it seems like they can do anything they want.

Jürgen Fritz and Brian Connolly sit face to face and are immobilized by Boris Nieslony, who alternately places bamboo stems in their jackets that he previously removed from the others. Lee Wen screams 'EVERYBODY' for the first time. Julie - brilliant with a red headdress she made herself

and which would make milliners green with envy - like a strange Melusine, she haunts the space creating in this way many possibilities of interaction. This game lasts until the light suddenly fades.

#### **ACT 4: Guests Arrive**

Alastair MacLennan - head and body covered with fishing net - does not look tired even though he has been performing for many hours now. He is alone - the space being closed to the audience - all night long. His moves are so slow that he seems to be in a trance. The artist is not inexperienced in that kind of long-lasting action. He has done more demanding stunts before. Esther Ferrer - just arrived from Paris - takes possession of a car wheel and turns on top of it, seeking balance. This great lady of performance art likes to create absurd situations while keeping simplicity of action. The amateur Van Poppel (at least this is what it says on his t-shirt) wanders with his feet in two crates of beer and holding another one in his hands. Lee Wen holds a pile of cardboard boxes on which is written 'this is not a work of art', as if a breath of Magritte was in the air. Elvira Santamaria and Helge Meyer burn matches and throw them out into an opened umbrella.

The Californian Jamie McMurry then comes on "stage" with a strong and powerful action; he becomes a horse. Half man, half horse, he ends up immolated and covered with blood, standing on bales of straw he had previously gathered together. 'InterActing' in the middle of the audience, bales of straw and broken glass are violently projected against the wall; his eloquent violence reminds us of the cowboys of the Great Plains. He then joins Black Market to share the afternoon of performance with them.

What passes through the mouth is being transformed; Julie spits blue paint out in a glass container full of translucent liquid; this mix changes slowly into a precious opalescent colour. Monica Klinger - the Swiss manager of Momentum, a platform for performing art - comes into the group rolling about slowly on the floor first and then accelerating her rolls and lying down, no matter what comes in her way. A lovely way of coming on stage, of measuring the space and taking possession of it, as an ex-dancer she enters very easily into the performance.

Boris Nieslony, lying on the floor, picks some seeds up from a small bucket and gently puts them one by one into the auditory canal of his ear, as a mystic and poetic ritual of a hypnotic slowness. Alastair and Roi Vaara take place in a car skeleton, removing everything they can from the inside to pile it up next to the doors. An artist joins them from outside for a while in perfect harmony. While he's lying underneath the car, Jamie McMurry's foot is being painted blue by Julie Andrée. Lee Wen wanders half-naked, holding a pile of books that Jacques Van Poppel will sellotape onto his body. His war cry 'EVERYBODY' resonates several times. Jürgen Fritz has put his shirt at the tip of several bamboos stuck together - a strange and unbalanced installation - that he holds at arm's length till he feels exhausted. Myriam Laplante, with an elf head on, calls to mind an imaginary world of fairies. Helge winds red sellotape round Jamie and, facing him, funnily mimes the moves he makes to get free. Jacques Van Poppel gently strokes Julie's head whose mouth is full of flowers she eats before she disappears under a pile of feathers. In the meantime, Esther Ferrer quickens and runs, pulling a table covered with shoes, which she puts back onto it as they fall off the table. Elvira makes music in an iron tub, giving rhythm to Giovanni Fontana's voice. Newly arrived, he takes a microphone and pays a ringing tribute to the artists. Everybody loves this ringing poetry. Esther Ferrer runs very quickly around a few chairs - a recurrent element in her actions - until the

amateur Jacques Van Poppel joins her, holding Lee Wen on his shoulders, putting an end to her reckless race and to this day.

### **ACT 5: Obviously everybody is exhausted!**

As we have understood, communication is most important to Black Market International. This art is very open-minded, everybody pays attention to the other and artists work on an exchange-basis: reciprocal and simultaneous with full respect to the others. This huge concentration of energy acts as an enlightener. Everything becomes possible and tension comes out of these simultaneous acts, reaching the audience that finds itself in an extremely generous process of exchange. Performance allows the body to embody its own aim; this is a physical and mental rite of passage. The ideal way of crossing boundaries, without going through them.

The last day, actions seem to be slower. This is probably due to the fact that artists are tired or simply to a track of time even more extended, as if rhythm was suspended. Myriam Laplante wears her costume made of peanuts; a long and quite unusual train follows her. Later on, standing on a chair, she seems enigmatically hung up in the air by her cloak. Boris Nieslony, head covered by a hood, watches the space as a magnifying glass blocks its opening. Jürgen Fritz jumps with a pile of bamboos in his hands; a huge tension comes out of his gesture; Alastair lines up very tiny animals on a sort of lawn that grew on the old motorbike's saddle. Esther Ferrer and Helge Meyer patiently cut with scissors meters of paper they then wrap around their necks, whilst Julie Andrée, perched above them, scratches the car's ceiling with one-meter long steel-nails. Alexander Del Re comes into action using salt - base of civilisations - and later on, he forces Helge to hold a strange balance by compelling him with a pendulum. Lee Wen, screaming what has been his leitmotiv during the last three days 'EVERYBODY', wanders, pushing Julie in a trolley filled with empty beer bottles. Julie gets changed and puts on a new t-shirt, which claims that rules are not made to be applied. Boris fills his eardrum with seeds again and Jürgen, facing him, imitates him with groundnuts. Then, one by one, the artists gather all the scattered materials around these two performers; they hold Esther on her chair right at the centre; Roi Vaara has covered his injured hand with white feathers and raises it up. The audience greatly acclaims these five days of performance. It is time for the artists - happy but exhausted - to celebrate this release.

### **Reactions and Dénouement**

Feedback from students expressed some of their expectations. All of them had broadly taken advantage of this experience. Laureen learnt how to play with the idea of watching the others while creating with them at the same time. Improvisation became a new starting point for her. She used to rehearse her performances beforehand. It is obvious that, in a group, one is not always active; so she also learned how to erase herself. Triona, who comes from Ireland, first experienced the community as a process that gets lost; she learned how to find her focus point and what remains for her is a sense of playing a game. Yola, the German, liked the approach of teaching of each one of Black Market International; this approach is parallel with the way they create. It comes from singing and is, from now on, closer to a type of performance in which communication and time are two important elements. She found herself condemned to silence whereas she is used to using her voice. This was not easy and things will appear clearer to her later on.

Sarah Jane Grimshaw has already taken part in a workshop with Alastair and Lee Wen. She had already learned how to take her time to compose images and how to control the process of slowing-down. She was aware of the audience around her and knew she had to let things open. She feels, as many others, that the workshop was too short! This young and promising artist - an Elevator artist this year - did a very touching action using beetroots. Through this personal work led under perfect control, she tried not to alienate the audience, using it in a clever way and establishing a subtle complicity.

Tom, the novice artist from London, showed a very personal and violent work and was interrupted by the artists. He felt supported and secure within an insecure situation. He felt delighted and asked for more. At night, he did not perform since he felt that the earlier work was a far too strong experience. He earned so much from this workshop that he did not want to take the risk of spoiling the moment; he has too much respect for this work and would rather watch to learn more.

To sum up, we attended a unique and exceptional symbiosis. Every participant, because of his/her origin, personality, creative power, own experience and talent managed to create many possibilities of intervention; the various proposals and innovations enticed us into a laboratory of an extraordinary inventiveness.

The duration of 5 days certainly enabled Black Market to improve the use of energy and to reach this state of intensely close interaction, where everyone becomes able to sense the other's intentions. The various worlds they drew us into left a strong souvenir to everyone; there is no doubt that, Looking back to this experience it turned out to be a strong catalyst for new thoughts. The artists managed to establish a breathing space in which everyone was then able to draw the quintessence out of this meeting; Black Market established an unexpected harmony and it is this freshness that best qualifies their work.

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#### **NRLA 2004**

**The National Review of Live Art, Glasgow, March 17-21, 2004.**

It takes place over five days at about this time each year and it really is a unique jewel in the crown of European performance art. It has been going since 1979, and been through all sorts of changes of format, location, and even name, but since 1984 it has been blessed with the indefatigable Nikki Milican as its Artistic Director, and has, for the past few years, been based in a place called The Arches a vast sprawling underground network of spaces beneath the Central Railway Station in Glasgow, Scotland. It has been the starting point for the careers of generations of British performance artists, and acts as a yearly magnet for artists, curators, promoters, and critics from all over Europe and beyond. It is Britains National Review of Live Art.

There are a number of reasons why the NRLA is unlike any other festival that I know, but its key characteristic is its deliberate combination of the work of long-established (indeed often celebrated) international artists, with mid-career artists and companies who are at the defining edge of contemporary performance (and with whom the NRLA has often developed a continuing relationship) and perhaps most importantly - with the carefully curated Elevator programme of mostly unseen pieces by young artists near the beginnings of their careers. And this is why the NRLA perennially insinuates itself as an event of such importance into the psyches of these artists: for many of them, this will have been the first time that they have found themselves taken seriously by, and as something like the equals of, artists whom they might previously have idolized. This year the roster of well known artists was particularly impressive, as it included the remarkable British performers Richard Layzell, Franko B., Liz Aggiss and Billie Cowie; Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci from Paris, France; Lee Wen from Singapore; Daniel Lveill and his dancers from Qubec; and Brooklyn's own Tehching Hsieh.

Liz Aggiss and Billie Cowie have worked together as the company Divas for rather longer than twenty years, specializing in live performance and dance for camera. They have had a long and fruitful association with the NRLA, and this time around they acted as Artists in Residence to the festival. They appeared late on the Thursday and Friday afternoons in the thick of the NRLA's densely-packed programme, and it really was a delight to see Ms Aggiss and Mr Cowie working at the peak of their considerable powers. At a more personal level it was a real fillip to see my contemporaries working with such focus and passion to present pieces that were not only full of intelligence and wit, but with a grasp of current technologies that probably outstripped anything by the younger artists in whose company they found themselves working. As its title hints, their performance *Scripted to within an Inch of her Life* provides a consideration, remarkably both ironic and virtuosic, of the performing body approaching the outer reaches of its own possibilities while making new allegiances with sound and video technologies. It really is a quite special work, and very much of a technical and intellectual piece with the 3D, four-screen video installation, *The Men in the Wall* that was Ms Aggiss and Mr Cowie's other offering here.

Saturday's Elevator program began at around lunch-time with a remarkable piece called *One Step At A Time* by a young woman from Nottingham by the name of Sharon Hatton. A shallow wooden tray, about ten feet long and three feet across, sits in the centre of a small space, and by its side are four heavy plastic bins. A couple of technicians enter the space and, donning heavy industrial gloves and safety masks they empty the contents of the bins into the wooden tray. It is broken glass, and its shattering green shards crackle and split as they are poured out of the bins and tamped down more or less even by the technicians. Then a man and a woman enter the space. They are dressed in black leotards and sweat pants and, alarmingly, they have bare feet. They stand at each end of the tray and, with a horrible inevitability they step forward into the glass. Once again it lets out its sickening crackling as it is crushed beneath their feet. They walk slowly towards one another, with understandable, almost exaggerated, care each time they put a foot down. Rather remarkably, they appear to be able to walk in the glass without the soles of their feet being slashed to ribbons. They approach one another. They embrace. They kiss. The tenderness of their movements and actions seems pointed up by the hideous soundtrack provided by their feet in the glass. Then they part, and return still ever so slowly to the ends of the wooden



tray where they began. Slowly, carefully, they step back out of the glass-filled tray and brush away with their fingers whatever fragments of glass have adhered to the soles of their feet. Somehow, neither of them has a single cut on their feet. The audience seems to let out a collective sigh of relief, and then breaks into noisy applause, which Ms Hatton and her accomplice acknowledge with rather shy smiles.

Later the same afternoon, Jacqueline Mann, an artist just graduated from art school in Dundee, Scotland, performed a mesmeric little piece called *Looped?* Her upper body hidden from view by a plastic enclosure, she stands on a square patch of grass seemingly cut from someones lawn and brought here to this brightly lit underground art space. In front of her is a supermarket shopping cart full of large bottles of clear liquid. She seems to be wearing a formal cocktail dress and high-heeled shoes. She begins to run. She runs on the spot as though the weight of the shopping cart prevents her from moving. Quickly the grass under her feet is chewed up by her high heels that gradually sink further into the gash of soft brown mud that they reveal. She runs and she runs. She gets nowhere. Two video monitors stand on each side of the enclosure. One shows the image of her feet running deeper and deeper into the mud. The other shows her face as it reddens and she gasps for breath. She runs pathetically until she is exhausted and can run no further. *Looped?* is a delightful and eloquent piece about futility.

And there are always surprises at the NRLA. Imagine this: you enter a long, low-lit room. At the far end stands a bearded man (his name, it turns out, is Zoran Todorovic, and he is from Serbia & Montenegro) and beside him there is a water bowl on a stand. He invites you to wash your hands in the bowl, and as you pick up the cake of translucent soap that sits by the bowl, he pours water over your hands from a heavy pitcher with an action that seems somehow ancient. It is perhaps at this moment that you see that, in the gloom, one whole wall of this room is covered with large scale, rather violently coloured photographs. In the first few, some sort of surgical procedure is being conducted. From a mans belly a thick heaving disc of yellow fat is being cut, slopping bright red blood behind it. The fat is then subjected to some sort of chemical process. You realize that the soap that you are washing your hands with is indeed the result of that process. Mr Todorovic smiles benignly as he continues to pour water for you. That is the sort of performance that makes you think again about things.

Or, one afternoon I wandered into a room where the simplest video installation was being presented: just one looped single screen with a soundtrack. It was *Halbeath* by the Japanese-Korean team, Takuji Kogo with Young Hae Chang Heavy Industries, and it focused upon the sad tale of a microchip manufacturing plant that was begun at Halbeath in Scotland by Hyundai in 1996, and which, after the Asian financial collapse, was taken over, and then abandoned, by Motorola. It is the shell of a huge factory, never completed and now being eroded by the harsh Scottish elements. So far so depressing. But what made *Halbeath* almost magical in its poignancy was its soundtrack: an old song of blighted love, with traditional instruments accompanying it, that was, apparently, a favorite of Japanese soldiers during the occupation of Korea during the Second World War. Very simple, but all the more effective for that.

So, these are just a few impressions from this years NRLA. Of course, I have hardly scratched the surface of the event as a whole. It starts on the Wednesday evening, and is then programmed from

lunch-time until after midnight each day right through until the Sunday night. This year I counted ninety-eight performances, installations, screenings, talks, presentations and other events. It is literally impossible to see everything. I have not even mentioned for example some of the things that most excited me: the seven hour performance made by Kate Stannard with white bread and red sewing thread; the pair of riveting pieces by Leslie Hill and Helen Paris; Goat Islands Mark Jeffreys huge, indisciplined, and mysterious performance featuring a lot of falling down and a truckload of coal; the deeply upsetting piece Airplanes and Skyscrapers by Parsons graduate, Ricky Seabra; Yann Marussichs creepy installation that was pretty much summed up by its title Self-portrait in an ant-hill; Essi Kausalainens piece for an audience of one that took place in a strange red nest that she had knitted; or Lisa Wesleys heroic and profoundly depressing Goin Gone in which she relates tales of wild, drunken nights out in Glasgow while scarfing chips and peanuts that she sluices down with a pint glass of her own piss.

I suppose it goes without saying that I am a huge fan of the National Review of Live Art. Indeed, since its inception I have only ever missed it once, and I certainly regard being there worth far more than the trip through five time zones that it requires. Each year I see work that I could never have even imagined before I got there, and each year my sense of the shape and direction of performance art is refined, and my faith in its importance revived. And each year I come away exhausted, wanting to sleep for a week, but with a pocket full of peoples business cards, or their phone numbers or email addresses scribbled on scraps of paper. It is, in other words, a crucial social nexus for the international community among whom the worlds most stimulating and pertinent contemporary art is being developed.

Robert Ayers is an English-born performance artist, critic and academic who lives in Manhattan and works internationally.