

Performance Art in the City of York

by Victoria Gray & Nathan Walker



Rather than forfeiting political and aesthetic risk, Gray and Walker appear more content to program more conceptually challenging work that positively antagonises the limits of an art form, rather than protecting it. Innovative and trenchant, Oui Performance continues to survive and thrive in what I hope could become a permanent zone of autonomy¹

The Scene and Being Seen

Oui Performance was founded in 2010 by Victoria Gray & Nathan Walker, as an artist-led curatorial collaboration, based in York, North Yorkshire. At that time, the infrastructure for experimental performance in the UK was markedly different.² Critically, there were no artist-led platforms dedicated to programming the work of emerging artists who identified their work as performance art or action art. Indeed, live art and experimental theatre, in the UK at least, were already recognized categories with well-established venues, networks, infrastructures and thus, funding.³

Without wishing to fuel an unproductive and antagonistic debate about the differences between live art and performance art, we had experienced difficulty getting our own work programmed within the context of existing live art and experimental theatre venues and festivals. Shifting our awareness to our artistic peer group and other emerging performance artists in the UK, we found a similar unfit.⁴ This acute experiential awareness of 'not fitting in' served to highlight the underlying, and often invisible politics of representation, curation and funding within the ecology of experimental performance in the UK. Thus, the establishment of a new network for emerging performance artists, outside of the already established live art and experimental theatre frameworks was imminent.

Despite our desire to nurture the ecology of practices closer to home, our search for existing models of artist-led, performance art networks, led us to research national and international networks and groups. Organizations such as *Bbeyond* (Belfast, Northern Ireland), *PAErsche* (NRW, Germany)⁵ and, *IPA* (International Performance Association)⁶ were formative to our development as an organization, and, to our establishment within an international network of peers. Our inception was therefore considered an *action*, in direct response to the lack of equivalent networks for performance art within the UK, but more specifically, within the Yorkshire region. Put simply, a context for our work didn't exist, so we made one. A network for our work didn't exist, so we made one.

1. Greenwood, M. (2012) Action Art Now #3
Oui Performance Space 109, York, Living Gallery,
[Online], <http://livinggallery.info/text/york1>

2. At the time of our inception, organizations such as *Performance Space* (London), festivals such as Buzzcut (Glasgow) and ACE funded consortiums such as Compass Live Art (Yorkshire), did not exist.

3. For example: venues such as the Greenroom (Manchester), Chelsea Theatre (London), Battersea Arts Center (London), and, Arnolfini (Bristol); Festivals such as NRLA (Glasgow), Spill Festival (London) and Fierce Festival (Birmingham).

4. See Gray, V. (2014) *For Performance Space*,
Living Gallery, [Online], http://livinggallery.info/text/victoria_gray

5. Bbeyond is committed to promoting the practice of performance art and artists in Northern Ireland and further afield, <http://bbeyondperformanceartweb.wordpress.com/>

6. PAErsche, the working title of the *Aktionslabor*, was founded in 2010 and operates from the Rhineland / Ruhr regions of Germany and neighboring countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Austria, <http://paersche.org/>

7. IPA - International Performance Association, <http://www.ipapress.i-pa.org/>

The Work and How it Works

Our approach was to commission new, solo and collaborative works, by artists with diverse approaches to performance art.⁸ In addition, we were interested in performance work that existed at the intersection of practices such as performance art, actionism, live art, sound art, body art, intervention, choreography, writing, sculpture and drawing, for example. It became clear that such practices had fallen through the cracks in mainstream programming, precisely because they existed in the interstices.

As such, the artists and practices that we have chosen to work with are uneasy hybrids, and, are often underrepresented because they are unrepresentable within the spatial and temporal limitations of mainstream performance venues and certain large-scale festival formats. In *Bleak Actions* (2011), we worked with artists whose work challenged conventions of site and duration. Artist Bean realized a durational work beginning in a tattoo studio, whereby audiences were invited to watch her leg being tattooed⁹, and, artist Christopher Mollon performed a site-specific work on the banks of the river Ouse between the hours of sunrise and sunset. By eschewing black box, theatre or gallery-based contexts, and, by presenting day-long and sometimes week-long durational works, these artists demonstrated the need for presentational formats outside of common touring networks and performance festivals, both of which stipulate certain restrictions on site and duration.

In *Live Series* (2010 – 2011), we programmed artists whose work questioned the politics and representation of the body (both human and animal) in artistic, social and political contexts. The actions, gestures, materials and objects employed were often controversial and challenging for audiences due to their visceral nature and the way they foregrounded sensitive issues of power and violence. For example, artist Mark Greenwood held a pair of scissors to a woman's throat, until palpable tensions caused the woman [Victoria Gray] to reverse the action and hold the scissors to his. Referencing this severing action, Greenwood held the head of a found, dead bird in his hand, whilst a sheep's skull watched from a plinth in the corner of the room.

Other artists questioned the politics of the body, violence and power through a more playful critique of the representational codes of performance art itself. Ewa Rybska and Wladyslaw Kazmierczak confronted each other holding a real bow and arrow and plastic machine guns in a critique of Ulay and Abramovic's 'Rest Energy' (1980). Later the pair constructed a painful image, binding each other's faces in raw red meat¹⁰.

8. See Gray, V. (2013) *Beyond Necessity: Can we save performance, or, can performance save itself?* In: Keidan, L & Wright, A, (eds) *Live Art Almanac Volume 3*. UK: Live Art Development Agency & Oberon Books; and, Gray, V. & Walker, N. (2011) *Out of Time: Group Action and Temporary Autonomous Zone, almost*, [Online], <http://www.ouiperformance.org.uk/files/outoftimeouiperformance.pdf>; and, Oui Book One (Oui Performance Press, 2011).

9. Gray, V. (2010) *Shattered Scattered: Bleak Actions in York*, [Online], <http://www.ouiperformance.org.uk/files/beanbleakvgray.pdf>

10. Kazmierczak, M. (2011) *The transcendental deduction / relation in time*. An interview with Wladyslaw Kazmierczak about two performances, Living Gallery, [Online], <http://livinggallery.info/text/kazmierczak>

Photo (from top to bottom):
Ewa Rybska & Wladyslaw Kazmierczak 2011 at OUI #3 by Jonathan Turner

Christopher Mollon 'HOME' 2011 at OUI #2 Bleak Actions by Tim Hunt

Dominic Thorpe 'The Cavity of the Mouth' 2011 at Action Art Now #3 by Tim Hunt





In *Action Art Now* (2011-12), we programmed regional, national and international artists who were also involved in artist-led organization of performance art in their own localities. For example: Poppy Jackson (*Liminal Bodies & Transatlantic Performance Practice*, London, UK); Leo Devlin, Alastair MacLennan, Hugh O'Donnell (*Bbeyond*, NI, UK); Ieke Trinks (*Performance Art Event*, Netherlands); Maria Dos Milagres (*Epipiderme*, Lisbon, Portugal); and Dominic Thorpe (*Unit 1 & The Performance Collective*, Dublin, Ireland). Through the presentation of these artists' works, the program surveyed the current networks whilst forging new connections within an international network of performance artists. As a result, the artists we presented in *Action Art Now*, and in our other programs, became a strong network. Critically, this network has been maintained, and, in the last five years, the network has grown on an international scale.¹¹

Since 2013, we have instigated longer-term, one-to-one relationships with artists, inviting durational and site-sensitive performances in historic sites in the City of York. In *SOLO SITE* (2014), artist Sandra Johnston presented work in Bedern Hall, a 14th century building originally part of the College of the Vicars Choral of York Minster. Our most recent project with artists Denys Blacker and Lee Hassall is presented in York's 15th century Guildhall. This project is especially sensitive to the shifting politics of a site, given the current scrutiny regarding proposals to redevelop the Guildhall, making it a Digital Media Arts Centre. In May 2015, the City of York council was to be

11. For an extended list of our performance art network, see: <http://www.ouiperformance.org.uk/links>

run by a Tory-Lib Dem coalition. Since then, the Guildhall redevelopment along with other York arts initiatives have been labelled “vanity projects.”¹² Situating performance art in *this* space, and at *this* time, is strategic and critical. The invitation is not only to witness art work, but to offer artists and audiences time and space to reflect in-situ, on the value of art in our current socio-political context.

Now Action Art

Reflecting on the disciplinary infidelities and institutional resistance articulated above, we have both playfully invented and seriously adopted “new” terms to articulate the radical hybridism of the practices within our network; *technotextual*, *subsociochoreohybrid*, *phonobjectactionism*, and, *biosculpturalsubjectivism*. As neologisms, these strange hybrid terms positively emphasize the ongoing struggle to represent such practices in already known languages, and, to situate such practices in already existing performance networks and presentational frameworks.

Our ongoing desire is to support artists that are unafraid to question these entrenched disciplinary boundaries, thereby antagonizing the limits of their art form, and, the “markets” for experimental art in the UK.¹³

Echoing this, at our inception in 2010, Oui Performance articulated these core values in the following manifesto-like statements:

Work Against Performance Arts Disappearance Under Commerce and Normative Hierarchies Covertly Operating Within Contemporary Art Culture // Actively Encourage Difficult Modes of Artistic Production and Consumption // Focus on the Local Situation // Create Makeshift Temporary Shelters for the Post-Spectacle Generation of Prosumer Actionists // Disorganise Organised Systems, Self Organize to Decentralize // Make a Social Space, Physical and Conceptual for Transitory Actionists to Meet¹⁴

In the present, and in the face of a newly “elected” Conservative government, these values must hold true. With a proposed “earn or learn” budget mandate, affecting a continued rise in tuition fees and the replacement of student maintenance grants with repayable loans, we are on the cusp of further inequality and worrying reforms in the arts, culture and education sectors.¹⁵ On the ground, these changes will continue to make funding and supporting marginal artists, non-institutional pedagogy and artist-led organizations such as Oui Performance all the more difficult. However, for that reason, the *action* of doing so, against the austere odds, becomes all the more critical.

12. Other important key York arts organizations affected are, York Arts Barge, <http://heartsbargeproject.com/>

13. For example, our project *Temporary Market* (2010) and our involvement in the national project, *Adhocracy: An Un-Fair of Benevolence* (New Work Network, UK, 2011), addressed creativity, activism, DIY culture and collective action through “market-stall” style economies of exchange. Our manifesto being that Oui Performance were “in the market for art, not in the art market.”

14. See *Sweat Equity Manifesto* (2011), available in-print and online, <http://www.ouiperformance.org.uk/files/se.pdf> [please copy and distribute freely].

15. Oui Performance are especially keen to establish alternative, non-institutional forms of pedagogy in the coming years. Since 2010, we have initiated workshops, group performances, talks, and in-formal “curricula” under the name *P.A.I.R.S (Performance Action Improvisation Research School)*. P.A.I.R.S represents a challenge to the problematic economy of existing pedagogical models, developing alternative strategies for self-education and free education through performance art, <http://www.ouiperformance.org.uk/vn-01>

An early version of this essay was originally published in, Carmichael, Y, & Crouch, A. eds, (2014), *Unruly Utterances: Participation, Criticality and Compass Festival 2014*, published by Compass Live Art and Live Art UK.