

**Focus Live Art
Friday 7th September 2001, 11am
West Midlands Arts, Birmingham**

List of Participants

Su Andi	Black Arts Alliance
Robert Ayers	Future Factory
Mark Ball	Fierce Earth (<i>am only</i>)
Daniel Brine	Live Art Development Agency
Sophie Cameron	New Work Network
cris cheek	Things Not Worth Keeping
Mark Dey (minutes)	
Gillian Dyson	Hull Time Based Arts
Stephanie Edmonds	West Midlands Arts
Salette Gressett	East England Arts
Lee Griffiths	Funding Pending Live Arts
Sandra Hall	Funding Pending Live Arts
Lois Keidan	Live Art Development Agency
Alison Lloyd	East Midlands Arts
Kirstie McKenzie	NOW/eXpo
Derek Nisbett	Talking Birds (<i>am only</i>)
Alan Rivett	Warwick Arts Centre
Anthony Roberts	Colchester Arts Centre
Lucy Sheerman	East England Arts
Rachel Thomas	Phoenix Arts Centre
Mark Waugh	Arts Council of England
James Yarker	Stan's Cafe (<i>pm only</i>)
Ayla Suveren	Dance 4

Minutes

- DB welcomed the participants. He noted that the meeting had come about through an informal national grouping of promoters wishing to address the uneven playing field for Live Art. He thanked the Arts Council and Regional Arts Boards for their support for the initiative. He concluded by introducing the meeting as an opportunity to think creatively about the future of Live Art.
- LK introduced the aims of the day and issues/questions for discussion:
 - How can Live Art artists and promoters be better resourced and empowered to do what they do?
 - How can the perception that the needs of Live Art are at odds with funding agendas be broken down?
 - How can funders be persuaded to see Live Art as a solution, not a problem?
 - How can the flexibility and inherent artform challenges of Live Art be better and more consistently 'placed' within the funding system?
 - How can the arts sector become equipped to deal with hybridity and the sophistication of practices?
 - What strategies might be adopted towards a more even playing field across regional borders?
 - What strategies might be adopted that respect the differing needs of artists and that recognize that “one size does not fit all”?

The potential to develop national partnerships and initiatives **Mark Waugh – Arts Council of England**

- MW outlined the difficulties of working with the structures of the Arts Council of England, and that he was not always able to achieve what he might want. He emphasised that just like artists and promoters, he had to work with the constraints of what is available and accessible. However, working within the funding structures allows for a rigorous negotiation of politics, and the possibility of advocating for the sector.

ACE and RAB mission statements tend to be broadly similar, but the priorities are open to drift and negotiation. This suits Live Art with its absence of fixity, and its product which is open to disappearance. The product is excitement and engagement, not “capital”.

MW outlined the experience of developing the *Shooting Live Artists* scheme with the BBC and developing commissions with Studio of the North. He discussed the process of sharing values between partners, then looking to how those values might fit with each partner organisation’s corporate aims, and negotiating where corporate aims don’t match the shared values. He suggested that working in partnership was of increasing importance to ACE’s approach.

MW referred to the quality of Live Art practitioners' funding applications and their clarity and sophistication when discussing work. With Live Art now placed within the Visual Arts Department of ACE, the quality of Live Art applications is impressive compared to those from other visual arts practitioners and this means Live Art is looked to as best practice.

MW cited Fierce Earth's *New Audiences Programme* project as an example of using Live Art practices to explore how non-art audiences perceive the arts are sold to them, and the sophistication of the consumer. He also discussed The New Art Gallery, Walsall working with La Ribot, and the importance of the gallery adapting its practices to allow the public permission into the unsettling and volatile aspects of Live Art. MW concluded by suggesting Live Art is well placed to ask the questions:

- What are the arts?
- What is the philosophy of the arts?
- Do the arts need to engage with radical difference?
- Who is the public for the arts?

A vision for a national network of artists Sophie Cameron – New Work Network

- SC introduced the work of the New Work Network. It was initiated in 1995 to enable practitioner networking; for sharing of ideas; to facilitate support; to advocate for practitioner needs; and to provide a forum within which the voice of the artist is integral. SC highlighted that NWN recognises that its development as a network needs to happen at an appropriate pace.

SC outlined NWN's aims and events profile, and highlighted that this was an ideal forum to encourage activity and input from the participants of the meeting. NWN is currently working towards a vision for a national network of artists. It is a national and inclusive organisation, both artist and sector led. It aims to develop positive links with funding bodies, and is a small fixed-term funded client of ACE.

SC highlighted a few of NWN's recent activities - including:

- *Live Late Review*. Peer assessment events linked to festivals.
- *The Chemistry Experiment* with Arnolfini Live. A series of debates about collaboration.
- Collating information for the sector.
- Specific professional development training on areas such as documentation, administration and marketing.
- Mentoring scheme for artists in eXpo (EMA-funded).
- Advocacy.

- NWN presence at festivals (building up the profile of NWN and increasing links with artists).

NWN is trying to create links and generate information and skills exchange for artists working within specific regions by creating regionally specific NWN meetings and then encouraging information and skills exchange between artists working within different regions. NWN aims to gather information from artists, identifying their specific professional development needs and use this information as a basis from which to form national strategy for creating relevant support structures for artists. SC highlighted the point that what is important to focus on within the network are the opportunities for members to be proactive within NWN.

- LK introduced two case studies which had been selected as a means to stimulate discussion. Both case studies were drawn from outside the participating regions to provide a broader national context for discussion.

Case Study One

Developing culturally specific training, support, networking and promotion

SuAndi – Black Arts Alliance

- SA read a variety of responses to the question of what people understand by “Live Art”. She quoted that “the thing about progress is it goes slower”, and she felt that was why the meeting was taking place. BAA “fell” into involvement with Live Art by meeting a need for artist mentoring. It is now on a new journey, but still the same journey. Previously, black arts didn’t fit into a specific area of the Arts Council, but relied on the dedication of individuals. There was no mentoring available for Live Art and there was a need for space.

BAA organised its first Art Black Live residential weekend, followed by a training weekend. SA felt that Art Black Live had failed because there are too few black practitioners for any one to emerge as the “lead” artist. Because there tended to be the “usual faces”, Art Black Live did not reach a point at which a white artist might have been brought in as a trainer. This suggested a need to bring in an international artist. But this would run the risk of what SA termed “nigger on top syndrome”. The sector would run away with whoever is brought in, seeing that artist as validated without applying assessment of quality.

SA commented that at the Focus Live Art meeting in Manchester, 5 September, delegates had sat in a circle. It is interesting to look at who makes room to allow new people into a circle. Live Art should be likened to a curve, not a circle. It is flexible and it moves. She described how Live Art has a set of English cultural habits. Live Art is an exploration of something internal that we make external.

Case Study Two

How an artist led initiative can lead key components of regional provision

Gillian Dyson – Hull Time Based Arts

- GD responded to a set of questions that had been provided by Live Art Development Agency. HTBA was formed in 1984 and is a secondary co-operative of an artist membership. It provides a newsletter, a membership fund, and access to equipment.

Is HTBA a key player for Live Art in its region? Difficult to say, compared to e.g. Sheffield. Does it do Live Art? It doesn't have a black box space. It is not unique in being artist-led. In terms of other provision in Hull, there is a dedicated Live Art space in the Ferens Art Gallery, but no staffing to run it. What are the region's sectoral priorities? In the Yorkshire Arts region, Live Art is positioned alongside new circus. HTBA primarily works with media artists. In the wider context, Hull itself is a regional priority in relation to the regeneration of the East Riding area. It has aspirations for top ten city status.

HTBA's mission statement includes a key statement about risk. Live Art fits with this mission because of its non-location. HTBA's development of a business strategy might seem the antithesis of an artistic strategy, but is not. HTBA wants to be a part of Hull, to form political partnerships and advocacy. It is able to become a key player because of its artistic programme. It has become included in the City's notion of regeneration, has been successful in gaining Lottery investment, and has developed partnerships with the Higher Education sector.

HTBA offers support to its artist members. It offers graduate awards and commissions for emergent artists. It creates employment and work learning opportunities. Its national and international profile is growing. It approaches audience development and cultural diversity issues through a process of "in-reach". In a predominantly white, working class city it has to work to get people actively involved.

HTBA has been funded through different art form budgets at differing points in its history. It needs people to recognise "the cracks between the pavement". Hybridity enables flexibility. The organisation has various pros and cons. It is artist-led, but can be a bit "arty" (though being artist-led can provide "good problems"). It is positioned to receive unsolicited proposals for artistic work, but can be perceived as elitist.

Live Art is about flexibility and re-location. These are challenging to the notion of a "fixed" organisation. HTBA has a high turnover of people, which strengthens its wider networks but weakens it as an organisation. Its positioning within use of new media attracts artists to it.

Discussion

- There was some time for discussion before lunch. This brought up a number of issues.
 - MW questioned whether the “circle” of Live Art is a clique, or a strategy for grouping together. SA felt that black artists are in the same club as others, but have to enter through different doors. They are invited because of their ethnicity rather than the quality of their work. She felt negative towards The Big Idea (ACE Year of Diversity). LK referred to London Arts Board’s recently developed cultural diversity strategy which threatens financial penalties to funded clients which don’t meet targets. This has various problematics, but is interesting as it emerges at the same time as The Big Idea. SA described how she felt that she had “become black along the way”, that there are frequent changes of terminology.
 - LK spoke of a need for some kind of structure for Live Art, to provide infrastructure and consistency. Is it a clique, or a small number of individuals who can drive things forward? SA commented that the smallness of the country means that there is an automatic perception of a clique. So it is even more important to bring new people in. LK stressed that the Focus Live Art meetings are intended to consult with the views of people of a level of experience.
 - CC noted that there is a tendency towards establishing and perpetuating infrastructures, whether or not they are redundant. The notion of infrastructure therefore needs a sense of flexibility and renewal. ARivett wondered why the meeting was uncomfortable about the term “clique”. When is it a clique, and when a network? It is more that the lexicon used by the Live Art sector is bizarre, and that’s what makes it feel cliquey. The sector has a strong network, but seems to find it a constant struggle to get to the table. He felt increasingly, in the context of proposed change, that there is little point in ACE. There seems no point in struggling to get around a national table. The practice should be the table; i.e. the network of practitioners should be the bottom-up basis of determination, not the top-down funding system. The existing system’s mandate for public funding of historical arts is only there because there continues to be new practice. The fact is that there are not that many people who constitute the continuance of new practice, and this dictates how the practice is spread nationally. We should be comfortable with the terms whether we use “clique” or “network”.
 - MW took issue, suggesting that if there were not an ACE, the alternative would be direct government funding. The issue is more that ACE should be more engaged with questioning the reasons behind public funding, which would be a useful role for it. ARivett responded that not all funding is derived from ACE, that state subsidy represents e.g. only 10% of Warwick Arts Centre’s income. LK felt that the practice and production

of works would exist, public funding or not. CC however felt that sometimes the production of work is funding-led, in response to schemes. This encourages certain kinds of work. LK felt that the more infrastructural support available, the better.

- GD pointed out that eventually ACE is a political tool of government. Despite the notion of political independence, ACE's statements go beyond art into political intervention. MW asserted the arms-length principle. SA and others felt that there is no embedded public awareness of ACE. GD continued that the financial and political agendas of ACE couldn't be separated. ARivett asserted that this meeting was about networking, leadership and focus for Live Art. ACE and RABs have a role in this. However it will happen, with or without funders. So there is a need to turn things upside down, i.e. think bottom-up rather than funding-down. LK added that this required the funding system to better understand the practice. GD commented that the practice of live art needs space for moments of reflection.
- RA was positive about the discussion that had taken place to this point, and commented on the question of clique or network that "the clique is the club that looks inwards". A network is when the "club" turns itself around to look outwards, and sends out roots and tendrils. The Live Art sector has always viewed itself as under threat, has always been seen as the "difficult child", has tended towards a sense of nostalgia that there used to be something that is no longer available. But its real value, echoing GD's presentation, is that it's not just about the arts. Live Art is an efficient way of doing regeneration, because of the way it gets messages and ideas into people. There is a tendency for the funding system to look aside from where the work really has its impacts.

How can we work collectively towards building a more effectively resourced and empowered Live Art sector across the country?

- Delegates were asked to submit what they felt might be key issues for discussion. LK welcomed the meeting back from lunch and outlined the issues that had been identified:
 - How to sustain careers
 - Spaces/places
 - Process v. product
 - Nature/diversity of practice
 - Audiences
 - Representational strategies
 - Developing infrastructures without institutionalism
 - Terminology/public perception
 - Recognising, qualifying and maintaining quality
 - Implications of perceptions of exclusivity
 - Expertise and advocacy within the funding system and beyond
 - The question of Higher Education

- Enabling artists to be artists.

Group Discussion

- There was time for discussion on the issues identified:
 - DB commented that Higher Education is very much a sector in itself. GD was also concerned with how to create opportunity for people without access to HE (training and development).
 - DB felt a lot of the issues raised were about profiling and communicating. SG felt some of this was to do with the problematics of the categorisation of “Live Art”, i.e. the diversity of practices grouped together. DB spoke about an “ethos” of work rather than an art form. LK felt that the move from the terminology “performance art” to “Live Art” represents a strategy and theoretical construct to recognise this diversity, rather than to define an art form. SG added that the terminology is one that practitioners don’t use. ARivett expanded on this to comment that if artists and audiences don’t use the definition “Live Art”, then it is just a term of convenience for the funding system. MW nevertheless felt having the terminology to be useful to advocacy. For instance, no one questions whether “dance” exists. It also serves to describe a canon of work. LK felt the terminology is useful not only to the funding system but also to the sector, enabling practitioners and others to see how their work relates to that of others. That is, Live Art is an umbrella term for a diversity of practices. It is not, however, useful as a marketing tool to reach audiences. MW introduced the idea of branding the practice as “Live Culture” following a project title in use by the Live Art Development Agency. SH felt the issue of terminology to be of lower importance. The terms used depend on the context, e.g. might not even use the term “artist” if working with a rave promoter rather than a funder.
 - LK gave two examples of works attracting substantial audiences for whom the question “is it art?” might be unimportant: Michael Landy’s public destruction of all his possessions, and Jeremy Dellar’s *Battle of Orgreave*. How can this mass appeal be used as advocacy? MW felt there is a gap in the funding system in its failure to recognise innovations and convergence in media. When working with the BBC at day-to-day level, he needed the term “Live Art” to help in expressing commonalities between these sorts of practices, but the terminology was not needed for agreements from upper management. ARoberts felt that this discussion of terminology to describe practice in the sector regularly resurfaces, and that whatever name is chosen someone will have a problem with it. A good term he’d overheard from an audience member was “weird shit”. The newness of the practice mitigates against having a definition. Nevertheless it is useful to have a term in making the case for funding. LK suggested that art does not yet have a name, i.e. new forms are emerging all the time. SA made a call on behalf of work that isn’t yet embraced by the funding system.

Regional groups, report back and summary

- Everyone was asked to divide into regional groups to look at some or all of the challenges and to discuss possible solutions in relation to their own practice, their region and the wider sector.

EAST MIDLANDS ARTS

Key areas recognised for development

1. Sustaining careers
2. Spaces/places
3. Expertise and advocacy in the funding system

Actions identified:

Short term (1-6 months)

1. Set up a NWN regional meeting
2. Restart local bimonthly platform events
3. Set up Live Art development think tank
4. AL to take notes made back to EMA

Mid term (6 months- 1 year)

5. For the think tank to produce a Live Art development strategy, which will be adopted, owned and executed by the think tank
6. Training and information needs to be developed from short term actions and as integral to strategy
7. Integral to strategy will be strategic advocacy to senior management and chief exec. at EMA

Long term (1 - 3 years)

8. With the knowledge that this action will be led very much by a Nottingham based group look at how this can be satellited out across region
9. If the strategy identifies, develop a Live Art development agency, whether this lies within a current organisation, or a new one

East England Arts

Key Issue: Developing Infrastructure

- While Colchester Art Centre is recognised for its work with Live Art, there is no regional infrastructure for the sector.
- East England Arts is supporting Colchester Art Centre to ‘champion’ Live Art for the region, but it cannot achieve much alone and needs a local infrastructure to work with.
- The time is right to develop this sector in the region, as East England Arts wants to encourage more risk-taking work.

- Perhaps best approach for the region is to focus on supporting ideas/ people/ projects, rather than venue-based Live Art flagships like in other regions.
- We need to call together a regional new work meeting to do a 'risk-audit' to identify those in the region who are practitioners, and others interested in supporting the sector in some way (e.g. work spaces).
- Would need New Work Network and Live Art Development Agency to attend (the regional meeting) to help maintain focus and plug into the national network.
- With a regional infrastructure for Live Art, those needs specific to developing the Live Art profile of this region can be identified, and RAB funding could be levered for tailored activities, e.g. residencies, bringing artists from outside the region to work in collaborations, etc.
- Eventually, it is hoped that bursaries similar to those of Live Art Development Agency can be offered to develop the careers of live artists in the region.

West Midlands Arts

- There was some discussion around the need to identify new venues in the region.
However, JY noted that this had not in his experience been a challenge, he identified that Stan's Cafe had received a small commission from the Bond Gallery and that this had led to the first work that Stan's Cafe made for a gallery space.
- SH asked the question; 'How do artists gain trust/track record etc. be eligible to deliver a project like YOTA?'
- LG raised questions of perception of Live Art. Most events are promoted as part of regular programmes or as part of festivals therefore there is a perception that they are institutionalised.
- MD said that Live Art does not attract the same education work as other artforms and this impacts on public perception as well.
- LK said that the funding system at WMA is flexible and that this flexibility takes the burden and responsibility off artists so that they don't have to constantly explain and justify their work.
- GD brought up the point that this flexibility could be a problem when work is poor and highlighted the importance of an evaluation system being in place so that artists can get productive feedback about their funding applications.
- SA raised the point that artists need funding with flexible timeframes so that artists get leeway to maximise the creative process and also have the space to re-work that process. SA also highlighted the problems that are sometimes caused by levels of discretion of officers – sometimes artists interpret support as 'favouritism' and these issues have to be addressed.
- There was some discussion around the importance of training and mentoring and also the need for adequate admin support/training. There was discussion around creating a pool of administrators and the pros and

cons of this were discussed; Artsadmin were mentioned as a model of good practice.

- JY highlighted the Space Invaders platform at Warwick Arts Centre and the fact that WAC received more than 20 applications this year, most of which were from students. It was noted that there is little provision for Live Artists in West Midlands training resources and this needs to be considered.
 - There was some further discussion around existing regional companies and the varying levels of admin support that each has.
 - LG proposed that WMA need to provide more opportunities for commissions that Live Artists can apply for.
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- Thanks were extended to all of those responsible for organising the event and to everyone attending.