

Live Art in Scotland: Richard DeDomenici

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Stephen Greer (SG): There are lots of places that we might start with, but I have been asking people about their first encounters with either theatre and performance or live art, whether it was studying it or seeing it. I don't know where the best place to start is. I'm wary of neat little origin stories, but I do know that you studied at Cardiff [School of Art] and I don't know if that's the place, or if there's an earlier moment that's more important.

Richard DeDomenici (RD): There's an earlier moment, but it's still at Cardiff [School of Art]. It was on the open day in early 1998. I knew I wanted to study art of some type. I'd done a foundation course in graphic design but they gave me a bad mark. They said, "Richard, your work isn't graphic design-y enough, it's got more in common with conceptual art". So I thought I should go and do a degree in something more to do with that. My art school education at GCSE level and A Level had basically involved drawing pictures of teapots with a pencil. It was pretty old fashioned. So I looked at a few places and Cardiff was interesting to me because they said you don't have to specialise in any of the departments, you can move freely between the departments for your degree. I thought that was really useful because I didn't know what I want to do. I went to the open day and there was a weird department there called the Time-Based department. I'd never heard of time-based art, and I'd not even really seen any performance work. I went upstairs and there was a performance going on by an artist called Kira O'Reilly. I didn't know who she was. I sat down and was watching it, and she was sat on a chair and had high heels on, and she took off the heels and put them down her top, and I had no means of interpreting what I was seeing. It was my first bit of performance art. I was laughing, basically, and I think I had to leave the room because I

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was being a bit disruptive, and I didn't know what I'd just seen but it stayed with me. I'm not sure if that was the reason I chose Cardiff, it was also because they said that you don't have to specialise, which was a lie. I got there [in September] and they said "you can choose three things in the first term, then you have to specialise". We were all there under false pretences. I thought "alright, I'll do printmaking, sculpture, I don't want to do painting", and then there was a decision between ceramics or Time-Based, and I just kind of rolled the dice and thought "I saw that funny performance, I'll do Time-Based". That was my way into performance art. So it was all Kira O'Reilly's doing, who I would end up going to Beijing with years later as a result of the National Review of Live Art. My final performance at Cardiff School of Art involved me blowing up balloons in a telephone box in the street for about two hours until the telephone box became completely full with balloons. It was a protest against BT's decision to stop expanding their public telephone box network. That's how long ago it was. I did it at a [new] festival in Cardiff called Experimentica.

SG: At Chapter?

RD: Yes. James Tyson and Cathy Gomez, and I don't think there was any money involved but they said "come and do your balloon performance Richard". Afterwards, in the Chapter bar, a woman came over to me and said "hello, I'm Lois from the Live Art Development Agency" and I didn't know who she was. We hadn't really used the term "live art" in Cardiff, we just called it time-based, so I didn't know what live art was [either, or that there was an agency for it]. She said "would you like to come and do your balloon performance at the National Review of Live Art in Glasgow?" and I said yes please, even though I didn't know what [the National Review of Live Art was either]. And that's how I met Lois. My first paid gig. Thank god she was there that day in Cardiff walking down the high street. That was over twenty years ago, sometime in the summer of 2001. The following spring I went up to Glasgow and that was my first NRLA. I remember arriving and finding the Arches, being whisked into a little room straight away, and suddenly I was in a performance. There was a naked woman covered in tattoos who turned out to be Marisa Carnesky. Suddenly, I was exposed to all this remarkable stuff that I'd never seen before. I was trying to think of a good analogy. I've got lots of analogies for what the NRLA was like. I've not read any of the Harry Potter books, but I imagine it's quite similar to Hogwarts, in that you go on a long train journey to Scotland, you walk through a secret door in a brick wall in the station, and suddenly you're in this magical place and there's amazing stuff happening all around you. The balloon performance was a success. I didn't know if it was going to work or not because it was in

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the street and most things at the NRLA were [indoors, so I didn't know if anyone would come] but luckily a few people did, and I showed some video documentation of it [the next day] in one of the arches, and I stuck some [text and drawings] on the wall, [in a little] installation. I was selling books as well. One of the people who came up to me was this guy who had been skulking around. I knew a couple of other artists there who I'd met [at eXpo festival] in Nottingham the autumn before, and maybe a couple of people from Cardiff, so I'd been chatting with some of them and they said "oh that bloke is called Anthony Roberts and he works at Colchester Arts Centre". I'd never heard of Colchester Arts Centre, and I'd never been to Colchester. He was just hanging around in the shadows, and not talking to anybody, but at the end he came up and gave me a fiver in exchange for some of my little books. Weeks later he phoned me up and we've been making work together ever since. The balloons [in the telephone box] was such a cheap performance. It cost about [seven] pounds, it didn't require any lighting or tech, or a venue even, but it was visually quite spectacular. I didn't know at the time, but the NLRA turned out to be a kind of trade show for live art, and it was full of producers from all around the world, and they knew it was going to be good stuff because it was curated by Nikki Millican who has got good taste. Promoters would come and say, I'll have that, that, and that, and this would be how they'd curate their festivals, which is quite lazy, but I ended up doing the very same thing a few years ago when I curated something.

SG: You didn't realise that when you went that first year?

RD: I didn't know what the National Review of Live Art was. I thought it would just be a little festival. It was so weird, the National Review of Live Art. I loved it, but it was weird. It was in Glasgow, there were barely any Scottish people there. It was people from all around the world. Was it open to the public even? Technically you could wander in if you knew it was there, but it was very cliquey. Cliquey in a good and a bad way. You were protected because it was like a little microcosm of loveliness and then you've got hundreds of thousands of people above you in the railway station, and they have no idea of the craziness that's happening beneath. There were all these amazing international promoters. I got asked to blow up balloons [in telephone boxes] around the UK for the next year after that, on the basis of that one performance, until my lung capacity became so good that it no longer [posed] a challenge to me, and I had to stop doing it.

SG: [Laughs].

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RD: So that was it, that was my entrance into the world of live art. I was on the radar then, because I'd been doing all these balloon performances, very luckily just from Lois seeing me in the street in Cardiff. I was suddenly an established live artist, which would not have happened, had she not walked by. I would probably be doing something else now. Then Nikki asked me back the next year, when they invited two artists to come back and show what they were doing one year on, so in 2003 I did a performance lecture called WATFORD: The WAY To move FORwarD. It was a satirical lecture about why Watford deserved city status, and that was my first performance lecture. After the second year, I decided this is a good place, I should keep coming back here every year even if I'm not performing. I went back in 2004, 2005, and then I [somehow] managed to convince them to let me be the artist in residence in 2006. I was quite bolshy. You have to be a bit opportunistic if you want to be a professional performance artist, so you're often talking to people and trying to convince them that it would be a good idea for you to make work with them. Alternate years I'd either be there as a punter or as a performer and I'd never had any money to go on a summer holiday, but just going to the NRLA was the happiest time of my year. I'd go there and hang out, meet interesting people, and see some performances. It was a beautiful time and I feel very lucky to have managed to go to almost ten of them, I think I went to nine in a row. The final nine. I missed about thirty of them because I didn't even know it existed and so I feel sad in a way, but also happy that I managed to go to some of them.

SG: It's so interesting that that first pair of works you did at the National Review, how in retrospect I'm seeing two threads that have run through so much of the rest of your work. You had the balloon work, which is sort of intervention or in response to public space and then the performance lecture is the other form and obviously your work since then is not as neatly defined in any way as those, but just how those early experiments were ones you've sort of stuck with or that you've carried on playing with.

RD: That's true, actually. They were separate at that time, but over the course of time, the performance lectures would be a way of me documenting the street performances. At NRLA 2006 I premiered another performance lecture called Did Priya Pathak Ever Get Her Wallet Back?, which was weird because the [NRLA has moved to] the Tramway that year. It was a controversial move, but it made sense. I was in Tramway 1, it was a huge space, and was not in any way full of people. I think it was the opening night as well, so it was Thursday at the NLRA which is a bit of a soft launch. There were maybe a hundred people in there, which for me, was very good. That was still

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the biggest [room I've ever performed in, even though] it was only at about 15% per cent capacity. It was a good 15% though, and a much warmer audience than when I took that show to Edinburgh, that's for sure.

SG: I was going to say because I know that show was at the Pleasance Dome I want to say?

RD: Yes, the Pleasance Dome. That's where it was.

SG: At what point do you start taking shows to the Fringe as well? I've heard particularly comedians talking about the month of the Fringe in the same way that you were talking about the NRLA. I don't have a holiday, but I'm going to go Edinburgh for the month, I'll have fun, and I'll see my friends. I'm going to lose a lot of money, but I'll have fun.

RD: Yes, it's similar. You're not going to lose as much money at the NRLA and you're less dependent on reviews for your own happiness than you are in Edinburgh. It's very easy to go to Edinburgh and end up having nobody come see your work, which doesn't happen at the NRLA because you're guaranteed an audience of hundreds of people. [In Edinburgh you ca]n end up in a terrible shame spiral if the reviews don't go very well and then nobody comes, which is what happened with Did Priya Pathak Ever Get Her Wallet Back? It was by no means a success and I was almost going to abandon the show completely, but I had one gig left that had been pre-booked by a guy called Stephen Hodge, who I also met at the NRLA, and programmed the Exeter Phoenix, and I thought I better go and do it, this final Did Priya Pathak Ever Get Her Wallet Back? in Exeter and I was dreading it because it was after the Edinburgh run. Weirdly, I think because it coincided with the week that students came back after summer, it was full and it's quite a big venue the Exeter Phoenix, it can hold four or five hundred people. It was full and everyone was laughing and there's footage of me being shocked that people are laughing at certain bits of it. I was [visibly] confused, and a little bit put out, because I wasn't used to the laughter. I realised then that it wasn't the show that was bad, it was the fact that I'd put it in the category of comedy [in Edinburgh that was bad] [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

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RD: You know what Edinburgh's like, it's pretty binary in terms of the choices you've got. You've got theatre or comedy. I thought it's not theatre, I'll upset the theatre reviewers if I put it in theatre. It's just me talking for an hour behind a desk. I thought there's a couple of gags in there, I'll put it in as comedy, which was a huge mistake. That was all because of Anthony Roberts as well, the guy who I'd met skulking around who bought the books. He organised this thing called East to Edinburgh, and because I lived in Watford, which was technically on the edge of The East of England, I was eligible to be taken up to Edinburgh and do stuff up there. I've probably done ten Edinburghs, and that's all because of Anthony who I met at the NRLA. So many of the things that I've done you can trace back and back, to bumping into people at the NRLA.

SG: Was that the Elevator, is that what it was called later on?

RD: It was called Escalator East to Edinburgh.

SG: Okay.

RD: But then there was the thing at the NRLA called Elevator, which I think was the programme of young student work. There are Elevators and escalators, all sorts of vertical and diagonal transport, used as metaphors in the live art sector.

SG: [Laughs].

RD: Escalator East to Edinburgh was about trying to get work that would never normally be shown at the Edinburgh Festival, because of budgets and stuff like that. My first one I would consider to be a failure, but I went back again and did other things, and put them in the theatre section instead. Theatre reviewers turned out to be much more open minded.

SG: [Laughs].

RD: I didn't give up on Edinburgh, and that's where I met Forest Fringe.

SG: I was just thinking about the chronology of that and their first year was 2006/2007.

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RD: Exactly, so that year that I was doing 'Priya Pathak' in the Pleasance, I'd be hating doing the show, but Anthony Roberts had his double-decker bus [venue] parked in the Meadows, where I could have and should have done my show, because it would have been much better there, but I didn't because I was keen to do it in a proper venue. Between the Pleasance and the Meadows was this place called Forest Fringe that I would wander into sometimes. There would be all this extraordinary stuff going on, the kind of stuff that you'd never normally get to see in Edinburgh, like durational work and one-on-one work and stuff with limited audience capacity and site-specific work. That really revolutionised Edinburgh.

SG: Did you know Andy or Debbie, I think Ira would have been involved later. Did you know either of them before that point or did you get to know them through Edinburgh?

RD: No, that's where I met them for the first time. I'd hang out there for a while, [and later performed a couple of things].

SG: I was looking back through my notes, I think you did a retrospective of The Redux Project which you maybe did in 2013, but before that you did something in 2010.

RD: Oh my god.

SG: Are you remembering that now?

RD: That's right. The Redux thing is hilarious, there's an amazing review, I don't know if you've read it. It's really good. There's a story about why that review is so bad.

SG: I'm not sure which review you mean.

RD: It's an amazing review in The Stage.

SG: Oh, okay.

RD: It's a compilation review of everything that was on at the Forest Fringe that year, and everything is getting really good reviews and then at the end it's Richard DeDomenici, The Redux

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Project, zero stars. It almost seems pointless mentioning it, but it's because I'd called out The Stage during the show for being sycophantic about my work. I said stop giving me such good reviews The Stage, and so they did stop, but the reviewer didn't mention that I'd asked them to stop, and I think that lacked journalistic integrity and that's all I have to say on the topic.

SG: [Laughs].

RD: But you're right. In 2010 I'd done a few shows in Edinburgh by that point and the venues were so ridiculously expensive, so Forest Fringe let me put a tent up in their back garden and I did my lecture in a tent with a little video projector. Then they moved to the north of the city and we did Trainspotting: Redux, and because Forest Fringe's model of doing experimental work at the Edinburgh Fringe was so revolutionary, festivals from around the world and international promoters would come and say hey Forest Fringe, why don't you come and replicate this model at our festival in South Korea or Japan. So then I'd get taken to these amazing places. I've been around the world with Forest Fringe because I met them in Edinburgh, where I was because of Anthony Roberts, who I met in The Arches, because Lois Keidan saw me blowing up balloons [in a phone box] in Cardiff. It all links.

SG: The other Edinburgh – I nearly said institution, but I don't know if it is or not – the British Council Showcase, am I right in thinking you worked with them at one point?

RD: Twice!

SG: What was the experience of that like because I've had conversations with other artists who have been involved with it who have had really positive experiences, but I also spoke to one person who said they didn't quite realise the way it was being used as a trade show and as a kind of project of British cultural transmission almost.

RD: That's what the British Council do, it's soft power. If you're not okay with that, you're not going to have a good time. Despite that, I thought no, come on, let's do this. They didn't give you any money, I don't think, although they might do now, but you are guaranteed an exciting international audience of promoters and delegates who will theoretically book your show. I did Plane Food Café [at the British Council Edinburgh Showcase] 2009. That was in the basement of

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the New Town Theatre in George St, back when things were still in George St, and it was in [their basement] kitchen. It only had a capacity of ten people and it involved us giving genuine hot airplane meals to everybody so it made a huge loss, [even though it was a critical success]. The show ended up touring to the Napoli Teatro Festival and it was going to go to other places, like Macau, but it was such an impractical loss-making show that it didn't make it anywhere else. In a way, I think The Redux Project was subconsciously a reaction against [the logistical complexity] of The Plane Food Café. That project is super cheap, and only requires one person on the road, with a laptop in their rucksack, and no freight. It's participatory [and site-specific] and has managed to do almost the complete opposite of The Plane Food Café, in terms of international touring.

SG: Was Popaganda, I've got a memory of Hunt & Darton?

RD: That was at Hunt & Darton [Café in 2012], yes. I think that was probably my most successful Edinburgh show in terms of audiences coming every day and it being full. I remember once I was doing a show called Plagiarismo! in Edinburgh and one person came. Admittedly, it was a very small venue, so one [audience member constituted about fifteen] percent of the audience capacity. I was in what was normally the coat check room at the New Town Theatre. One woman was sat there and I asked, "do you really want to go through with this?" and she was like, "yes, I've come all the way from Glasgow!". So, we just did [the show, one on one] and it was great actually. I don't think any of my shows have really been what you'd call successful in Edinburgh, especially compared to Kimmings [who I also made friends with at the NRLA]. I think Popaganda was the closest because it wasn't a huge venue but it was big enough and it was mostly full. Hunt & Darton were great, putting me up there that month.

SG: Is there something about the weirdness of the Edinburgh festival?

RD: I love Edinburgh, I like going there and hanging out, but I hate doing shows there. I don't like the idea of having to do flyering, standing in the street an hour before your show trying to hand [people leaflets they don't want] is just soul destroying, and no one cares, and then you've got to go and do your show. I was never good at self-promotion there, because I didn't like having to give out flyers, and it's so competitive.

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SG: I guess there's that frame you were talking about earlier which is the phonebook programme, which says are you theatre, comedy, or cabaret, and you have to pick one section which you're going to sit in.

RD: Yes, I never really felt that there was a convenient place for my work there, but it didn't stop me from going and trying, that's for sure.

SG: I suppose that is the premise of Forest Fringe and maybe Hunt & Darton. They create spaces where that what category is your work question doesn't really apply or is not as important.

RD: Yes, I think so. I think that kind of work can really benefit from the framework of Hunt & Darton or Forest Fringe, that will attract the kind of weirdos who will like the thing you do, and then suddenly there you are. The Edinburgh Festival has always been a tricky one for me. The first thing I ever did there was called Sexed Up in 2003, and was the second project I did with Anthony Roberts, who I'd met at the NRLA the previous year. He invited me to come and be the artist in residence at the first East to Edinburgh. It was a performance lecture about whether or not the cannons of Edinburgh Castle could [be hijacked and used to] shoot projectiles at the Scottish Parliament building, [which has just opened] down the other end of The Royal Mile, and it turned out they quite easily could. I made and researched the lecture during the month of Edinburgh and then I did two shows at the end of the Festival. I would go on to perform that again at The Arches, but not during the NRLA.

SG: Arches Live?

RD: Yes, I think it was Arches Live. Mark Brown came, who was always doing amazing reviews of stuff at the NRLA, and he wrote some very kind words about me which I've used in quotations ever since. I would go back to The Arches sometimes and do other things with them, because I'd met Jackie Wylie at the NRLA. Mark Godber from Artsadmin had introduced me to Jackie Wylie and we got on very well. I didn't really understand why, and I was quite surprised and impressed that she liked me. Suzi Simpson too, [she curated a great] festival called New Works New Worlds. I'd always been fascinated by The Arches and how there were trains directly above us, you could hear them rumbling, and it would be very noisy actually when you were sat in a performance that was supposed to be quiet, but it was great. It woke you up sometimes when you were sat in a

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particularly durational performance. So I did a piece in 2010 called *Over Your Head*. iPads had just come out, but we couldn't afford an iPad so we used a little [portable DVD player which looked a bit like an iPad] and you could walk along a route [through the Arches, and the screen] would show you what was happening in the station immediately above you. It was a little bit wonky, but it was the wonkiness of experimental augmented reality. The Plane Food Café also went to The Arches. I loved making work at The Arches. Even after the NRLA finished, I still did a couple of things there until it closed, which I thought was a tragedy. First the NRLA closing and then The Arches closing. What's in those arches now, do you know?

SG: The physical space of The Arches is a sort of pop-up boutique food place [laughs]. I can bring myself to go in actually. I went in to see some piece of performance which was after hours. It was really weird going back into the space. I'd been there the last night it had been open as a club and I'd been there the day it shut helping someone clear out their set. I think a few years had passed and I'd gone back into the building. I'm interested in that space of The Arches but also the sensibility, I'm thinking of Jackie being there. I'm trying to think about what characterises the outlook of people like Jackie, Lois, and Nikki in terms of the way they work with artists and how trust is baked into those relationships. I don't know if that's the right word or not for describing the sensibility of it.

RD: Well they were all women, which I think helps. There are loads of really strong matriarchal figures in the live art sector which is brilliant. You had Gill and Jude at Artsadmin, people like Philippa Barr and Sophie Cameron who used to run New Work Network, and all these amazing organisations that were mainly run by women. It's quite unusual, even within the arts, so I think that's got a lot to do with it. I was raised by a single mother and several aunts and so I think I always felt very comfortable working with them all. I remember once Jackie dragged me into the basement and *Alien War* was happening. Do you know about *Alien War*? I think it was during the NRLA. She said let's not go and see this next performance, come with me, I've got something to show you. We went downstairs and put on these helmets and guns and then suddenly we were battling aliens. I love the fact that both of these two things were happening in the Arches at the same time. I actually tried to merge them one year. I'd come up with all these ridiculous ideas once I got a little bit self-confident, because the first few years I was still a little bit scared of the NRLA and Nikki. We'd see her walk past, all the young artists, and she'd kind of glide by, and we'd go "ah that's Nikki Millican". A bit like Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*. We were scared but

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also revered and loved her. It took me a few years to gain the self-confidence to start suggesting ridiculous things, but one year I was going to try and merge Alien War with the NRLA in a disgusting way. I also had a great idea for this queuing performance because [the NRLA at] the Arches were renowned for its queues. It was getting a bit too small, and that's why it had to go to Tramway, and so you'd spend more time in the queues than the performances sometimes. There'd be such limited audience capacity that people would start queueing hours before the performance would begin. The queues were great though, you'd have some of your best moments in the queues. I figured out a route [through the Arches] where you could have an ongoing infinite circular queue round all these corners. I just wanted to have everyone queue for something [listed in the brochure, and when the venue opened people would be led through a door in the back of the space, and join the rear of the same queue, which would then start moving. Forever]. We never quite got round to doing that, logistically, but I would always send Nikki Millican all these ridiculous ideas for things and most of the time she would say yeah, sure, which I find amazing. Even though live art is quite niche, [Nikki had her own stylistic preferences within that niche, but was always very good at curating stuff that wasn't necessarily in that niche]. But I still always felt "why am I allowed in here? I don't make work that fits within this genre". I felt that a lot, generally. I feel quite lucky that Lois let me in. I recognise that for some people, things like the NRLA and the Live Art Development Agency do feel a bit cliquey. I feel that, but I'm feeling that from within the fence. I have a desire to break the fence down but I'm glad that I'm trying to do so from within the fence. I know some people who came to the NRLA one year and didn't feel like it was for them and didn't feel comfortable there. I've seen artists who made amazing work and who presented work there and it didn't get a good response and they never came back, or they thought "well, maybe that means I'm not a live artist" and they went off and did other things.

SG: I don't want to invite paranoia, but what is it about your work you think doesn't fit in live art?

RD: It's just too stupid and silly isn't it? At the NRLA it was quite rare to see anything that was openly comedic, humorous, or just stupid.

SG: I think I've read a thing saying that one of the reasons that you were interested in laughter was its involuntary nature and that it works to break down people's defences and catches people by surprise and that maybe that will be a way of getting them to think about whatever you want to talk about, but it's a way of bringing down people's defences in the first instance.

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RD: Yes. If you find something funny, it's hard to pretend that you don't find it funny. I know how people react when you do performance art in the street. People pretend not to notice you. I do it as well, when I see people doing stuff in the street. You don't want to give them the pleasure of knowing that you've noticed them. But if it's funny, and you laugh, then that's it, your barriers are down, and people are much more willing to engage and maybe they'll ask you why you're doing this, and you can talk to them. It creates multiple entry points, and that's why I'm interested in [using humour]. But I was always a little bit paranoid that at some point they'd say, actually Richard, your work doesn't qualify for this festival and you must leave. It was a kind of weird combination of paranoia and cockiness. I think the two of them were trying to cancel each other out a bit.

SG: It does feel like sometimes, I'm thinking about the show that you did for the thirtieth anniversary, you're actively teasing the NRLA and what it stands for.

RD: Yes, that was supposed to be [almost] like a comedy roast. The problem with that DeDomeNRLArchive launch in 2010 was that it was held on the Thursday night, and most of the people who were referenced didn't arrive until the Friday. It made curatorial sense to do it on the Thursday because it was the launch night, but it was a tough room because a lot of people didn't know what I was talking about. I'd gone a little bit too —

SG: Too meta.

RD: Yes, I think so. I was always trying to kick back a little bit at the NRLA, but at the same time, I loved it. There was a kind of tension there that I always had. It was my favourite place to go to, but I was always slightly trying to subvert and dismantle it a bit, which I don't know if Nikki always appreciated.

SG: Is that an ongoing thread of your relationship to institutions in particular? There's a gorgeous turn of phrase that I found in one interview with you talking about acts of low-grade civil disobedience and some of them were taking place in the street, but some of them were taking place inside the building.

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RD: Yes. It's like that Groucho Marx [quote] about not wanting to belong to any club that would have you as a member.

SG: [Laughs]. One of the interesting things about this project is first of all what can be talked about that isn't libellous or whatever and also what is just shared knowledge. It's interesting that people have deeply shared memories which aren't necessarily visible to people outside of the community which is interesting when I'm playing the part of historian. Do I put my finger on the scale and choose to make some things which seem like private communal memories part of a public official record?

RD: Yes.

SG: What point did you get involved with BUZZCUT? Was that something that you'd come up to see stuff, you saw it on your radar? I think you did one of the shows over at Summerhall through BUZZCUT's programme there?

RD: Yes. I knew Nic and Rosana from the NRLA. They were two students from the RSAMD who were very driven and doing interesting things. When the NRLA collapsed there was a general sense of sadness amongst the community. You could feel it, it was palpable. I'm not a fan of Star Wars, but there's a bit in Star Wars where Princess Leia's planet gets destroyed, and Obi-wan Kenobi says something about 'there has been a great disturbance..' and [that's how it felt]. There was a general sense of doom and misery. When I heard that Rosana and Nic were thinking about putting on their own festival, I thought wow, that's never going to work but it's a great idea, I loved the idea. It's an idea that I've stolen really. When Eurovision got cancelled last year, I decided to organise my own international song contest instead, and I think that was very much based on the BUZZCUT model. Anyway, they asked do you want to come and do something at BUZZCUT number one and I said yes. I had a new lecture that I hadn't taken to Edinburgh yet, Popaganda, so I think I did the second ever performance of Popaganda at BUZZCUT. Louise Orwin was on after me. It was such a lovely crowd. They had a great venue and a brilliant group of people. All the Glasgow kids from the NRLA were there. It didn't have quite the same reach in terms of international promoters and stuff, but it was amazing that they'd put this thing together. I was so impressed. They were taking some of the work to Summerhall, so me and Louise ended up performing in the operating theatre.

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SG: The Anatomy Lecture Theatre?

RD: Yes. The floor kind of curves down and there's a little gutter where the blood would drain away, and chains hanging from the ceiling. I went back and did something at the second BUZZCUT [too, one of my first Reduxes, in which we recreated a scene from the movie Cloud Atlas, which had been filmed in Glasgow even though it was set in San Francisco]. BUZZCUT wasn't the same as the NRLA, but it filled the gap really well considering they [didn't really have any] funding for the first couple of years. It was a remarkable achievement. It was different, but it was as good, if not better, in that it was quite community focussed, and you'd have kids wandering in off the street in Govan, and just sitting down and watching a bit of performance art. It was like "are your parents here? No, okay, fine just come in and watch this bit of performance". It was amazing. It was much more linked to the community than the NRLA. I think that's fair to say. So yes, BUZZCUT became my annual pilgrimage to Glasgow. I've been to four or five of them. But nothing has ever managed to replicate the magic of the NRLA. [It made economic sense to travel] to Scotland and pay for accommodation, because you knew you were going to see one hundred amazing performances. It was very good value really, even though I was always griping about how much it cost to get in. I might have snuck in once by making a fake wristband which I apologise for. They use the same coloured wristbands every year man, come on. There's Spill Festival which almost comes close in terms of the genre of work, but nothing has had that same magical combination of things. And Nikki did it for thirty years. There were so many amazing people there. You'd bump into someone from Belgium, like Antoine Pickels who I went off and did a residency with. You would bump into lots of people at the bar. There was a great place at the bar at the Arches, [at the right hand corner, by a little doorway] which led to the main thoroughfare. If you just stood there, within about half an hour, every single person at the festival would walk past you and so you could meet everyone just by hanging out there. Occasionally, if you were lucky, someone would come by and say "hi Richard, can I buy you a drink and talk to you about this thing I'm doing?". It was amazing. The years that I wasn't performing it was expensive [to go to the NRLA], but it was worth it because you'd only need to get a couple of gigs from schmoozing at the bar and you'd be in profit. Some years I even got reviewed when I wasn't performing, which wasn't my fault. The year that the fire alarm got set off and Ron Athey had to get wheeled into the street on a gurney, with a sheet over him. We were all waiting outside and somehow I had a tea trolley with baklava on it [which I was serving to people], and that got written up as a piece of performance by Mary

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Brennan for the British Council On Tour magazine, so I ended up getting a five star review and I wasn't even performing that year. I remember some people getting quite annoyed because they hadn't been mentioned. I don't know what I was doing, but it seemed to work out quite well for me at the NRLA and I feel lucky. Another time these two guys from the RSAMD came up to me, Dan and Ben Graupner their names were, and they said "hey, we like your work, we want to take you to America". I thought they were bullshitting me, because one of them was dressed as a gorilla and I couldn't take them seriously, but we ended up going on tour to New York, Wisconsin, Chicago, and Milwaukee. You just bumped into extraordinary people at the NRLA who drag you to extraordinary places. I've never experienced anything like it since, it's almost like a dream. I'm glad that it's not a dream though, and that I'm not making it all up. If I die and if heaven does actually exist, I'd like to think it'll be a bit like the NRLA, because everyone was so nice. It was such a weird, obscure sector that people weren't arrogant because we were all in the same boat. Nobody cared apart from the people in the room. All the enthusiasts were there. There were a few reviewers who came, Mary Brennan, Lynn Gardner, and Mark Brown came, but most of the theatre reviewers didn't come because it wasn't considered theatre. Most of the art reviewers didn't come because it wasn't considered art. It kind of fell between two stools, but that was great in a way because you felt protected, and it was such a warm audience. Someone contacted me the other day, by the way, weirdly, a woman who had seen Did Priya Pathak Ever Get Her Wallet Back? in Exeter in 2006, to say how much she had enjoyed that show. The Exeter performance was the best performance of that show I ever did. We got talking and it turns out she wrote an essay about Franko B's DJing at the NRLA. I don't know if anyone's mentioned Franko B's DJing at the NRLA?

SG: No.

RD: It was quite antisocial, it was so loud. He was doing it on the very top floor of the Tramway, and we were in the bar, several floors downstairs, and couldn't hold a conversation because of the loudness of Franko B's DJing. It was so loud that there was no one up there, it was just Franko by himself with his decks. It was dangerously loud. The whole building was resonating because of Franko B's amazing DJing on the top floor.

SG: The only other thing that I'd thought to ask about, and maybe this is for another time, is about your sense of your peers or your fellow travellers knowing that you've been a friend of Bryony Kimmings for a long time and other folk who have been part of that world.

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RD: Yes. I met Kimmings in 2003 because I'd just written a performance lecture called Embracing Failure, because Sophie Cameron from New Work Network had asked me to give a talk about my work, [which I performed for the first time] at Brunel University, and Kimmings was in the audience. She was in the final year, so a couple of years younger than me. Her, Jenny Edbrooke, Alex, there was this whole row of students who were really mouthy but I could tell had the right stuff. Kimmings came to the [next NRLA, and we became great friends]. One year, they all performed there as well, but it didn't appear to go down very well, and we couldn't tell why. I feel that Kimmings has never really been accepted by the live art community, and maybe it's because she's too popular. She sells too many tickets [laughs]. Some people have never really been let in by the gatekeepers and I'm confused by that. I remember seeing Figs in Wigs perform once, at a different festival, and it was a brilliant show, but I could tell that [some of the important people in the room didn't get it]. You can never tell what people are going to get.

SG: It's so funny. Figs in Wigs is a really good example. At BUZZCUT festival they did Double Thrills which is the programme at CCA which they programme and it went down so well so I wonder whether it's about the audience or the frame? Is it the context?

RD: Yes, sometimes it's that. Sometimes it's curatorial, or the blurb might be [slightly] wrong. It might be the room, the way the chairs are set up. It all has an effect, and if you're lucky, it goes well. Tiny little things can cause a disaster. I remember seeing Ron Athey at the CCA. He was doing that piece with all the bits of glass and staples in his head, on a raised platform. I think I'd seen it before at Visions of Excess in London, so I was familiar with the performance already, but it's quite a bloody one even for Ron. He was taking this little staple out of his forehead, and I think he accidentally opened an artery there, and so the blood was spurting like a big stream. He's ever the pro, and he kept on going, but we could tell that wasn't supposed to happen and people started fainting. It was very dark in the room, and he was the only thing that was lit, but you could hear people falling to the ground. Once a couple of people started fainting, [it set off a chain reaction], and you could just hear the thuds —

SG: Dominoes.

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RD: Yes, people were dropping like flies. It was one of the most remarkable things I've ever seen. One of the people was Jackie Wylie. In her defence, I think she might have been pregnant at the time, but even Jackie Wylie. That's the visceral power of performance art.

SG: I'm trying to remember who else I've spoken to, maybe not for this project but before I started doing it officially, who was there for that performance. Someone else has described to me a clear memory of the jet of blood coming from his forehead.

RD: It was really visible; it was like a hose. But one of the interesting things about the people who were just out of school [at the NRLA] is they're all grown up now and some of them are curating their own festivals. Like Robin Deacon, who performed there at a similar time to me. We'd often get [mistaken for each other], even though I'm white and he's black, just because we've got the same initials; we both came out of Cardiff - he was a couple of years above me - we both do performance lectures; we're both based in the East of England. We'd often get mixed up, so he'd get called Richard Deacon and I'd get called Robin DeDomenici. Anyway he's just taken over Spill Festival which is amazing.

SG: Oh yes, of course he has. It was really exciting to see that. There is something really interesting there about the role that other festivals have taken on. There were always other festivals in addition to the National Review, but [it's interesting] how many of them are effectively artist-led collectives or friendship groups who have stepped into that space. BUZZCUT was originally Nick and Rosana who are friends and Forest Fringe was originally a small group of friends which became a larger group of friends. I think Andy has quite consciously talked about it that way.

RD: Yes, well I tried curating a festival once. It was called Rub Me Up the Wrong Way and it was based at the Norwich Arts Centre. I did two of them over consecutive years. It was basically what I was criticising earlier, I just went to the NRLA and said I'll have that, that, that, that, and that. We had Alexis O'Hara from Canada, who is an amazing artist who has performed at the NRLA several times. The excellent Rosie Dennis from Australia. They all happened to be in the country at the same time so I was able to get them to come up to Norwich. It's hard curating a live art festival. My one was only very small but it really made me develop an extra level of respect for Nikki Millican and what she did. [The NRLA was a huge] festival to programme, and I don't know how

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she did it. It's never been replicated since really, although a few years ago, Nikki kind of came back to curate this thing in London called SACRED: Homelands at [Toynbee Studios] which was kind of a miniature NRLA stylistically. It was amazing, almost like it was back. A little NRLA, it was so nice. I was hoping that would become an annual affair but it hasn't, yet. The NRLA archive is great, and I'm glad that they put all the 30th anniversary stuff online, but presumably the rest of it is still there somewhere, and I'd love to see it. I hope somebody reads your book and goes wow, we should recreate this again, here's some money, let's do something like that. Otherwise, maybe there could be some kind of virtual reality NRLA. That's my new idea. It could be called the VRLA and you put a pair of goggles on and suddenly you're back in The Arches, and it's dark and smoky because people [can smoke cigarettes indoors in VR] and there's liquid dripping from the ceiling, you can't see anything, there are trains everywhere, and then you see some live art. I think that would be a very evocative experience for some people. I always wanted to get the NRLA and take some of the performances you saw there and put them out into the streets. I had an idea, and they were up for it actually, you know the Tron Theatre? There's that little sculpture on the facade, a golden cherub [by Kenny Hunter]. I proposed to get a cherry picker and remove the cherub temporarily, and we'd get Franko B painted gold to stand there for a couple of hours instead, just looking at people. Weirdly, Franko was up for it and the Tron were game too, but for some reason we never managed to make it happen. I love live art but I think so much of it is seen indoors by live art people. I think its true power is being seen in public by people who have no experience of what they're seeing, much like how I saw Kira O'Reilly's performance [in Cardiff]. It has a transformative effect that can last for decades.