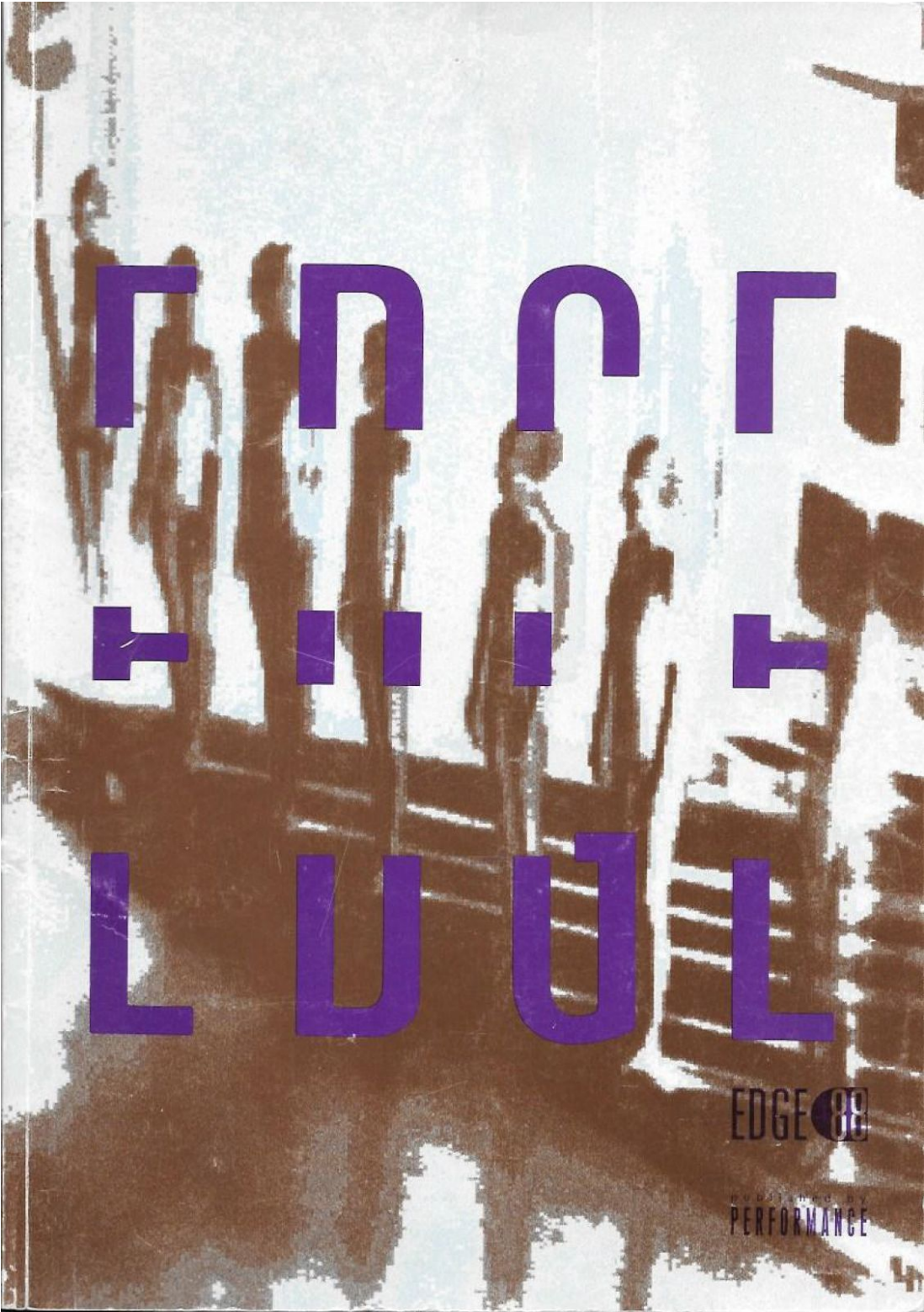


AT THE EDGE OF AN ERA
Revisiting a hidden village of art from the '80s



Introduction

The vibrant and active 1980s Performance Magazine started to present performances and installations towards the end of the decade. The largest was EDGE 88, one of London's first site-specific performance/installation festivals, and was attended by artists, such as Helena Goldwater at the start of her career. 30 years later, Goldwater and Rob La Frenais, former editor of the magazine and Director of EDGE 88, decided to revisit this and other 80s performance events.

In partnership with the Live Art Development Agency [LADA], *At the Edge of an Era*, taking place in 2019/20 after an R&D period, will bring together generations of artists, national organisations and galleries to introduce and revisit Performance Art practices of the past and future, in a comprehensive programme of performance and exhibition and the creation of an online resource and publication.

History

EDGE 88 was launched after 2 years of planning, campaigning and studying overseas examples, such as the 1987 Documenta, which contained a comprehensive performance programme for the first time. It was preceded over a 3 year period by performances and installations organised by Performance Magazine: *Art in Danger* at the Diorama, and *At The Edge* and *The Last Sweat of Youth* at AIR Gallery, and followed in 1989 by EDGE 89, and *The Last Weekend*, *Allenheads* - all programmed by Rob La Frenais. EDGE 89, organised by Tracey Warr, who went on to co-edit the seminal book, *The Artists Body*, comprised of a promenade version of Isaac Julien's seminal film *Looking for Langston*, staged in Kings Cross, where the current site of Central Saint Martins now stands, and Cornelia Parker's train installation, *Left Luggage*, held in Kings Cross station. These events will also be included in *At the Edge of an Era*.

EDGE 88 was "an idiosyncratic survey of contributions...what interests me is the artists' ability to respond to an unusual space or situation and to appropriate it for one's own obsessions" (Rob La Frenais talking to Sarah Kent in Time Out, 1988)

The EDGE 88 team, including Sara Selwood at the AIR Gallery, and Projects UK in Newcastle secured funding from the Arts Council to stage a programme of 24 performance-based works in Clerkenwell, London in 1988, some of which then toured to Newcastle. Clerkenwell was then a semi-derelict and cheap place to live, rather than the developed and expensive area of London it is now. And so it was possible for them to negotiate the use of a variety of spaces from the Slaughterhouse, Flaxman Gallery, the Cloister Garden of the Grand Priory Church, Ironmonger Row Swimming Baths, the Woodbridge Chapel, and the disused prison cells under the then Kingsway Princeton College.

Accompanying the works was a catalogue, edited by Marjorie Althorpe-Guyton, and published in conjunction with Performance Magazine, (then edited by Steve Rogers). It included artists' pages and essays by Dan Cameron, Silvia Eiblmayr, Steven Durland and Gray Watson,

exploring the avant-garde, feminism and representation, performance in the US and Canada and thinking around 'content', as well as an introduction by Chrissie Iles.

The artists programmed included both UK-based artists – Rasheed Araeen, Ian Breakwell, Stuart Brisley, Helen Chadwick, Rose Garrard, Mona Hatoum, Tina Keane, Alastair MacLennan, Denis Masi and Silvia Ziranek, and international artists - Marcelle van Bommel (The Netherlands), Jerzy Beres (Poland), Vera Body (Hungary), Valie Export (Austria), Vera Frenkel (Canada), Derek Kreckler/Adrienne Gaha/Sarah Miller aka Told By An Idiot (Australia), Nigel Rolfe (Ireland), Ulrike Rosenbach (West Germany [sic]), Carolee Schneeman (USA), Carlos Santos (Spain), Roberto Taroni (Italy), Zbigniew Warpechowski (Poland), Paul Wong (Canada) and Peter Zegfeld (The Netherlands).

Deanna Petherbridge succinctly captures the unique atmosphere and impact of EDGE 88, writing in the Financial Times: “Wandering around Clerkenwell, the inner city village with its secret squares, unexpected alleys, bosky churchyards and good pubs is pleasurable enough on a mild Autumn evening. To also discover curious installations and obsessive activities along the way makes for a rich and very metropolitan experience. As well as gallery venues such as AIR and the Flaxman Gallery, artists have chosen swimming pools, churches and disused offices for their ‘laboratory ‘ pieces. The installations, using videos, lasers, live performance, props and written material, are works on the edge of fine art practice: on the edge too, of politics and emotions. Sometimes a cutting edge...sometimes a blunt instrument”

EDGE 88 represents the culmination and peak of such activity in London in the '80s. It also marks a moment of change. Preceding the '80s, performance art was a, mostly, respected and key experimental practice linked historically to fine art. There had been a dynamic community of artists who 'made things happen', and audiences keen to experience the cutting edge of art making.

In the '80s performance art was a dynamic field of practice amongst many in Fine Art. After 1989 everything changed. With the rise of the YBA and the shift in focus to marketability, performance art lost its position in the contemporary art gaze. It could not seemingly be bought; its temporality, and perhaps radical politics and experimentation, were not considered conducive to sales. The response was not a negative one – out of the ashes grew a burgeoning of multidisciplinary performance, which sought funding, venues and support from elsewhere than the contemporary art worlds. The '90s though changed how performance was viewed and contextualised. *At the Edge of an Era* seeks to highlight not only an important event and grouping of artists and writers, but also to demonstrate the historical context that they inhabited and the legacy that remains.

Rationale

Introduction:

At the Edge of an Era is pertinent now because it documents and archives the little historicised heritage of performance art in the UK both generally, and in particular in London, at its most dynamic time – the late 1980s. A time, which in hindsight, was the beginning of change and the end of an era. A changing art world, a changing landscape of performance, and a changing London.

This re-visiting will connect generations – those that were part of the original programmes, those that witnessed and were influenced by them, and new generations who are unknowingly benefiting from the actions of the past - offering a legacy of knowledge and important artworks that are currently obscured.

The perception of UK histories of Art:

The way performance art has been historicised differs depending on the perspective of the Curator.

Some believe it ceased in the UK around 1980, when experimental performance became spread across different venues and contexts, such as theatre and cabaret, and not solely the preserve of Art contexts. Hence there is a lack of representation of Performance Art since that date in major art museums.

Some believe that it ceased around 1990 - post-YBA and the resultant marketisation of Art. Some know it has never gone away, but has just found alternative contexts and sites, or mostly made outside of the country where contexts have continued or developed.

As the history has not been charted via UK art galleries and museums, or indeed within publications, when there are many recent contemporary artists making performance-based art works, (such as Seghal, Chetwynd, Spooner and so on), and art students with little access to the story of Performance Art in the UK yet very engaged in the making of performance, now is the right time to highlight the exciting and vibrant period of the late 1980s when performance Art was at the heart of contemporary Art. EDGE 88, EDGE 89, the AIR Gallery and Diorama, programmed over 30 artists in over 10 venues. This was a time in London when it was possible to see Performance Art.

Changing London:

The relationship artists used to have to London was one of possibility – the impromptu, the potential, the adaptable. Although this can still be seen today, in the 1980s there were a lot more spaces and sites, and less money needed allowing performance art to thrive. There were squats, the establishment of co-ops, cheap housing, and undeveloped buildings. Now, artists are leaving in droves, because of escalating house prices or rent charges. Due to regeneration there are also less venues and sites to stage work, alongside the expense of hiring spaces or

equipment, and a lack of funding support. *At the Edge of an Era* seeks to show a moment in time where artists flourishing in London was not a contradiction, a struggle to survive but a possible place, a place of discourse and experimentation not dependent on enormous amounts of money and patronage.

Legacy:

The impact of seeing performance art in the late '80s on younger artists at the time was an opening up of the possibilities of practice. In the terms of the time, including Postmodernism, anything was possible. This led to the breaking down of the white cube, alongside of course its opposite – a re-affirming for many that they wanted their work shown inside the more conventional and monetised gallery, thus creating quite binary positions. It was a feisty and fruitful fight – asking questions about the very nature of art, why and where it could be shown and reaching audiences that didn't just go to the gallery to see art. Whilst most artists now consider both as possible sites for discourse, it is the time-based and ephemeral – outside of the conventional gallery - that is less known. Those younger artists are now mid-career artists, and often tutors of the next generation, and they carry the legacy as an oral history, or there are fragments of remains that may be stumbled upon, rather than a more concretised, archived, and documented history. Inter-generational exchange is therefore at the heart of the rationale for re-visiting this rich period of practice. *At the Edge of an Era* seeks to share the influential work of the past and leave a legacy readily accessible to future generations.

Helena Goldwater and Rob La Frenais

Summary of original participants:

Artists:

EDGE 88 -The artists programmed included both UK-based artists – Rasheed Araeen, Ian Breakwell, Stuart Brisley, Helen Chadwick, Rose Garrard, Mona Hatoum, Tina Keane, Alastair MacLennan, Denis Masi and Silvia Ziranek, and international artists - Marcelle van Bommel (The Netherlands), Jerzy Beres (Poland), Vera Body (Hungary), Valie Export (Austria), Vera Frenkel (Canada), Derek Kreckler/Adrienne Gaha/Sarah Miller aka Told By An Idiot (Australia), Nigel Rolfe (Ireland), Ulrike Rosenbach (West Germany [sic]), Carolee Schneeman (USA), Carlos Santos (Spain), Roberto Taroni (Italy), Zbigniew Warpechowski (Poland), Paul Wong (Canada) and Peter Zegfeld (The Netherlands).

EDGE 89 – *Looking for Langston* (promenade performance/son et lumiere) by Isaac Julien and *Left Luggage* (installation) by Cornelia Parker

Art in Danger, (1985-86), Diorama - Bow Gamelan Ensemble, (Anne Bean, Richard Wilson, Paul Burwell) Richard Layzell, Anne Seagrave and the Wild Wigglers.

At the Edge (1987) and Last Sweat of Youth (1988), AIR Gallery - Mona Hatoum, Bow Gamelan Ensemble, Marty St James and Anne Wilson, Bruce Gilchrist, Hester Reeve and Vanessa Jones, Lucia King, John Jordan and others.

The Last Weekend (1989), in Alston/Nenthead/Allenheads - Anne Bean, John Jordan, Neo-Naturists, Gillian Dyson, Wink Van Kempen, Kees Mol and many more.

Writers:

EDGE 88 catalogue edited by Marjorie Althorpe-Guyton, published in conjunction with Performance Magazine and then Editor, Steve Rogers. Introduction by Chrissie Iles. Essays by Dan Cameron, Silvia Eiblmayr, Steven Durland and Gray Watson.