

Live Art Futures

I am an optimist.

It is spring.

The daffodils are early this year and the sun already warm on my face.

I'm just back from Glasgow, now just 2 hours and 20 minutes on the new train, where I've been taking part in a weekend long celebration of performance taking place across the city.

For a week it feels like art and performance have infiltrated the lives of everyone in the city. And every corner of the city has been a home for art.

I have spent half an hour alone in a room with a 16-year-old boy who tells me in minute detail what it is like to be 16 year old, in Glasgow right now. He talks about his hopes and his fears, his love of politics and art, his band, his family, his allotment on the outskirts of the city. He tells me about his favourite film and his love of Italian food and the girl at school with the curly hair who smiles at him when she passes on her bike. It is uplifting and affecting and beautiful. It is art and it is live.

I have seen a durational performance where actors dressed as unemployed bankers from the Royal Bank of Scotland build a boat out of credit cards and set sail on the Clyde.

I spot a performance collective fresh out of Exeter University with something important to say about life and Britain and the end of the internet.

I have spent an hour watching a woman and her 12-year-old son painstakingly taking apart, cleaning and reassembling a gun whilst listening to 1960s rock and roll at high volume.

I have been disappointed by a much talked about young company from Copenhagen who make pieces about food production and meat manufacture. In Danish.

I have watched a new performance piece in a crowd of 40,000 at Ibrox Stadium played by a collective from Birmingham. It is a mass participation dance that blurs the boundaries between performer and audience and I leave in tears of joy.

I have seen a piece about the end of capitalism played out across a city centre shopping mall.

I have witnessed the sewers and the motorways taken over by large puppets.

I have spent some time alone and more time with others.

I am enriched.

I am transformed.

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It's good to be back at home and catching up on the news.

Baroness Keidan of Hoxton is on the telly again. This time as part of a debate about electoral reform and progressive politics. It's good to see Question Time continuing to value the artist above the politician with Adrian Howells, Helen Paris, Tim Etchells and a young black artist from Brighton joining Keidan on the panel. They are talking about the economy and education. The debate feels real and immediate and relevant. The points made offer creative solutions to complex issues. Sense is spoken. Breakthroughs are made. I feel a groundswell of popular support.

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Tomorrow I will visit my daughter's school again to meet her teachers and talk about her education. This is a regular state funded school and typical of thousands up and down the country. The school looks like many others – an old Victorian building with three dozen classrooms, an assembly hall, a sports hall and a playground. It looks like the school I went to. But schools have changed and teaching has changed since I was a student.

My daughter has inspirational teachers who place creativity at the heart of her learning. There is no curriculum anymore and standardised assessment is a thing of the past. Differences are celebrated. Exams at primary school are a distant memory. No one subject is valued over another. Learning and play are thoroughly integrated. She excels at writing, cricket and filmmaking. She is crap at maths. She is best when she is using her hands. She plays guitar. The school encourages students to create – things, stories, performances, structures, paintings, dialogues, more stories. My daughter is thriving here. She is crap at maths. She will do brilliantly. She is getting equipped for the world.

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My daughter's teacher is an artist. She makes performance pieces about nature and the climate. The last piece she made was about the return of the brown bear to the forests of Scotland. It was a delicate show about warm fur and a plentiful supply of salmon. It talked about our beautiful planet and our hopes for its future. It also dealt with death and extinction and humanity's crimes against nature. It was at times savage and unrelenting. But ultimately epic and uplifting. We all loved it and keep talking about it as a family. The teacher is both educator and artist and those two roles feed each other. The teacher has the time, space and money to be excellent at both. Her next piece will be about the last days of the right wing press.

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The Arts Council is now run by Grayson Perry and staffed by a small and incredibly helpful coterie of artists and practitioners from a range of disciplines. Most are part-time and combine their support for artists and the arts with work on their own practice. Distinctions such as live art, experimental theatre, visual art and live literature no longer exist. The Council now takes brave decisions, backs its instincts and hunches and supports a huge body of work up and down the country.

Great work is supported.

Experiments are backed with real money and artists with talent are funded to take risks with their work. Collaborations are encouraged.

Tickets are subsidised.. Great art for everyone has become a reality for people across England. Back to Back Theatre from Sydney have just finished touring village halls and the New York City Players revival of *Boxing 2000* has now been extended in London's west End. Tickets are affordable; little more than a trip to the cinema. Everyone goes.

Franko B is Chair of the Arts Council and continues to transform the image of the agency at their national office. The extra money secured from government last year is widely recognised as his greatest achievement as chair. He continues to practice, lecture, inspire and shock audiences

internationally. He has the trust of audiences and artists.

The Arts Council's offices on Great Peter Street have become the largest gallery space in Westminster. Five floors of contemporary work and open to the public seven days a week. A few administrators work at laptops on the gallery floor and occasional meetings are held in the cafe in the basement. Relationship managers have been replaced by practitioners who conduct their business in theatres, arts centres, on trains, in libraries and village halls, artists' studios up and down the country.

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Two artists and a teacher now sit on the cabinet. The role of the artist and the teacher in society has been reversed from the general perception just 10 years ago. British society now seems to actively embrace difference and creativity. Big business has given way to more resilient companies run by artists and educators. Last year's short-lived artists' strike brought the country to a standstill and brought about power cuts in the south east and in Cornwall. This year, with artists' access to better pay, benefits and pensions now resolved, no such action is anticipated. The role of teacher is now properly understood as a central lynchpin of a thriving society. The phrase, 'those who can do, those who can't teach' seems anachronistic and hilariously reminiscent of a distant time even though it was still used just a decade ago.

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Equally distant is the notion of celebrity. Only a decade ago young people wanted to be footballers or pop stars. Fuelled by a media obsessed with fashion, looks and money, we had created a generation that had lost touch with what was important. Now a generation that previously valued fame express their creativity through music, performance, visual arts and literature. After last years' Lepage Prize everyone wants to perform on buses and on trains, in supermarkets, in theatres, in offices, in peoples' houses.

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Just a few months in the planning, the Berlin Accord is now signed after artists and climate scientists thrashed out a last minute deal. Rumours are rife that a performance by a teenager from The Maldives spelt out the need for an immediate and lasting global commitment to emissions reduction. Delegates rushed to sign up to a deal brokered by guitarists, puppeteers and an aerial act from Dalston.

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I'm looking forward to Forced Entertainment's new six part series on BBC1 called The End of Everything Ever. It promises Twisted Showbiz, gorilla suits, loud guitar and that inimitable opening line up of chairs. They are saying it will do for TV what Twin Peaks did 30 years ago – an arthouse TV event with mass appeal. The watercooler moment of the decade. My expectations are sky high.

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I am imagining a new piece that takes place in a studio theatre. It takes real eight year olds, men and women in their thirties and pensioners and gives them amplified and distorted voices that express their darkest fears and secrets. It is about racism and growing old and being misunderstood and hope and loneliness. It is in essence a profound meditation on life and death, full of hope and sorrow.

I am imagining a game that you can play where an artist spends a day researching your life before coming to your place of work and offering your colleagues a tiny glimpse of the qualities they have never seen in you. It is warm and intimate and generous and uplifting for all concerned. It makes you think about the people you work with differently and it makes you reflect on your self and how you appear to the world. It is about acts of kindness and how like a virus they can spread to all you know.

I am imagining a piece at my local swimming pool funded by Lambeth Council that makes me think about my grandfather and how I never told him I loved him. Tomorrow I will tell my father I love him and we will be forever closer.

I am imagining a piece for 10 year olds that treats my daughter like an adult. It is dangerous and unsettling and makes both she and I realise that we are from different generations and that soon she will be in charge. It's cool and after witnessing it, I feel something that might otherwise have taken years to realise.

I am imagining a collaboration between David Lynch and a theatre company from Seattle. The piece they have made is frustrating and fractured and hilarious and like the very best performance burns in the memory long after the show is done. It is epic and intimate and like nothing I have seen before. They reckon it will run until Christmas and all my friends and family and neighbours will get to see it.

I am imagining the headlines on the 10 o'clock news are about three new pieces from Lone Twin.

I am imagining sitting on a train watching a live stream of Uninvited Guests new durational piece on my phone. I talk to Richard and Jess who perform my instructions dressed as rabbits. They are in Madrid and look tired after 8 hours performing without a break. I'm disturbing my fellow passengers on the train with my laughter.

I am imagining the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square occupied by an artist from Liberia who is reading the bible backwards. It is incomprehensible and mesmerising. There is a large crowd.

I am imagining a large man covered from head to toe in tattoos. He is performing a dance in the centre circle at Old Trafford at half time in the local football derby. The crowd is silent as they watch this small, heavy figure twist and turn. As he spins and leaps the colour of his tattoos blur and he becomes a kaleidoscope of reds and greens and blacks. We are too far from him to see the sweat on his forehead but he is clearly focused and precise in his dance. He concludes in a series of moves that look like he is floating; a large man dressed only in a pair of shorts but

somehow graceful and beyond gravity. He falls to his knees and raises his hands to the sky. The crowd erupts, a noise louder than United's first goal of the afternoon. We are all here together experiencing something beautiful, unique, almost spiritual. \

I am imagining the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern full of helium balloons. Slung beneath each balloon are wicker baskets made by artists from Shetland and in each there are groups of two or three people slowly rising and descending on the thermals in this vast space. I jump into one and float off to a live soundscape created by Thom Yorke. I think about the ground below and the music takes me to a place that is neither earth bound nor heavenly. I feel transformed and somewhere between laughter and tears.

I am imagining an audience at the ICA. 100 people in a room together – some performing, the others witnesses to some ideas being expressed. As I scan the room I see my mum and dad and a class of school children from an inner city school and teachers and builders from the local construction site, and a policeman, and artists and a doctor and a taxi driver and a train driver and an airship captain and an Olympic rower. We're all in a room together and this thing we are experiencing is complex and touching and beautiful and in 30 minutes we will all leave a little different. Right now we are an audience and each one of us is taking something connected but different from being in this room together. There is excitement in the air. We are breathing a little faster than usual. This is live.

David Micklem May 2010