

Edinburgh Festival Reviews 2009

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Performance

Adriano Adewale: Sound Journey (Segue Productions)

A lovely and captivating piece that contained elements of performance art and dance as well as music, indeed it often felt that it contained less of what could be called music in the expected definition of the word and was instead more akin to the description given in the title: a 'sound journey'. The combination was in equal measure mesmerising, relaxing, fascinating and extremely hypnotic in places. It recalled at times the mind-altering rhythms employed in many of the world's indigenous cultures as an integral element of ritual. Indeed the whole performance had a slightly magical, ritual feel only compounded by Adriano's own considerable personal charisma as he stalked the stage like a spider, wide-eye and agile, purposely silent or else using his own steps as a form of percussion. He haunted and crept about the space between his various percussional stations, each housing a family of certain sound generating implements - I call them such because not all of them could be defined as instruments in the conventional sense. There were awe-inspiring sections, particularly the incredible speed tambourine playing that made the more extreme guitar-shredding moments of 1980's rock gods look timid by comparison. There were also moments of humour such as the deft segue from the rhythmic beating of drainpipes with flip-flops seamlessly into Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and back again which succeeded in drawing a few chuckles from the audience. As well as these enjoyable varieties of pace and tone the performance also contained some very physical moments such as the point at which Adriano donned a special outfit completely covered over in bottle-tops, shimmering and writhing across the stage like some armoured lizard, his whole body becoming an instrument. The performance contained elements of real atmosphere, some of its more trance-like moments nostalgically recalling for me nights of getting lost in layers of bongo drumming at the Glastonbury festival or psychedelic atmospheres reminiscent of pieces such as Pink Floyd's legendary Ummagumma album. The concluding movement complete with its gentle and ingenious rainfall moment was particularly effective at mentally transporting the audience to another space. I surfaced from the performance feeling more than a little entranced.

Beast (Bookshelf Productions)

A piece of new writing and my personal favourite performance at any of the venues that I was working for (meaning I got to see it for free and hence went back three times!) Beast was an extremely lyrical and touching work. Beautiful, evocative, euphoric, sexual and tragic it made good use of archive film footage to insect the various passages of action, suggesting a loose and undefined dreamlike passage of time, as scenes bled together like the verses of a poem. 'Poetic' is a much over-used adjective when referring to either visual art or theatre but this was certainly poetic in the true sense of the word. Unlike much of what I saw this year it was very much in the conventional theatre camp, text-based and narrative driven, but its unique and particular strength I felt derived from its lusciously rich and expansive language. Carefully chosen words, rhythmic and sonorous, evoked empathy and emotionally transported the audience directly into the characters' experiences of falling in love, of sexual arousal and loss. This must be said to be in no small part down, not only to the sheer expressive quality of Elena Bolster's writing, but to the exceptional acting of Graham Edwards and particularly Aine O'Sullivan. O'Sullivan's

intense, emotional delivery left me reeling and numerous members of the audience weeping. Being able to cry on demand might be something of an acting party-trick but in the immediacy and intimacy of this tiny venue where you could literally see her eyes start to glitter and well-up as they fixed upon members of the small and breathless audience in turn before the tears broke upon her cheeks just feet away was extremely moving. A perfectly contained, touching and magical little play that explores love in through all its stages and ultimately blossoms with insight into what it truly means to love someone, not only passionately but also compassionately. Inspirational.

Class of '76 (Third Angel)

A charming performance lecture which, now in its third incarnation (at least!), took the audience on a winding journey. Told with deft storytelling ability by Alex Kelly, the work took us through the process of tracing classmates from a class photo taken at Chuckery Infant School, Walsall in 1976. Alex relayed the triumphs and set backs of his self-appointed challenge with more than a little humour and considerable amounts of warmth. Through the ingenious use of projection that intriguingly paralleled the narrative - the faces were present all along but only became visible to us when we turned our particular attention to finding them through Alex's use of a white card - we were presented with a series of personal stories. There was significant nostalgia from which indeed the piece derived much of its effect. Whilst the storytelling was well balanced and pitched with clever changes of tone and direction to engage and captivate the audience within its funny and fascinating narrative, the piece worked primarily upon the collective nostalgia that it evoked but that operated on a simultaneously personal level. This was particularly evident in the concluding section with its significant procession of childhood imagery that brought up all manner of fleeting moments of memory in me that were in many ways quite moving. Aside from the nostalgia the work also raised no small amount of existential questions about what we do with our lives, how our choices and backgrounds effect what we become and the humour was tinged for me with melancholy and a slight sense of loss for the transience of lives and relationships. Indeed, conceived before facebook and its ilk gave us all that false sense of the perpetual present there was something truly profound about the way in which relationships became frozen in time and the shocking realisation that in fact time had moved on and those little boys and girls that we knew from school have indeed turned into something remarkably similar to their parents. All in all a deceptively and effortlessly simple show that overcame the audience with humour only to hit them with a moving and thought-provoking work that still lingers on after the applause has faded.

Dean Gibbons and the Knowledge of Death (Silvia Mercuriali and Matt Rudkin)

Billed as a darkly comic 'social-science fiction' the two-person show contained some interesting visual elements and some impressive physical performance from Mercuriali. Interesting though the piece was and arresting in its moments of sheer physicality the narrative to me personally felt laboured and overly complex and the piece seemed to miss its mark, falling through the gap between its joint aims being neither particularly profound or especially funny. Laudable and exciting as it was conceptual to have genre so deliberately broken down and see comedy meshed in such a committed fashion into the serious social commentary and theoretical explorations of the narrative it just didn't quite hang together for me. Interesting? yes, different? - yes, am I glad that I went to see it? yes - it is good to see something unexpected and challenge oneself with something slightly different, however I couldn't help being left a little nonplussed by the supposedly dramatic conclusion. For a narrative drawing to an apocalyptic ending in which mankind is

ultimately doomed it left me incredibly unmoved and I exited with a shrug. The press release speaks of a “disinterested world galloping towards catastrophe” and whilst I was well and truly part of that disinterested world by the final curtain as we left I overheard the people in the seats next to me saying how much they loved the piece and that it was one of the best they'd seen. Personal opinions vary I suppose.

Death of a Samurai (A Light)

I was lucky enough to catch a short preview but unlucky enough not to experience the full performance of this consistently sold out piece. A magical and visually stunning work that combined luscious costume colour and movement with a disarmingly kitsch charm. Allegedly a re-imagining of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* through the context of Japanese popular culture any narrative was entirely lost on me during the cut down version that I saw and instead I was entirely captivated as myriad troupe of exotic characters whirled and shrieked through space and amongst the audience. The dazzling, fluid movements recalling the high-stylised choreography found in Japanese cinema whilst the expressive and melodramatic protagonists recalled manga or video-game characters. There was whooping and screaming and spinning and weaving in and out of each other as stylised conflicts and dances unfolded. On a number of occasions unwitting glass-collectors in the bar where the preview was performed were sent ducking for their lives as sweeping samurai swords clashed above their heads and ninjas swooped beneath them. The fight elements seamlessly integrated into the dance and were more tightly choreographed than a Hollywood movie so that you became unaware of any rehearsed choreography as such and the immersive action flowed and dived around you in a totally fluid and occasionally spectacularly chaotic display. Breathless and pulsating with startling visuals that burn their impressive imprint onto the retina.

Devoted and Disgruntled (Improbable)

Devoted and Disgruntled was part discussion, part seminar, part group therapy and part exercise in agitation. Drawing together practitioners from across the spectrum of the theatre and performing 'community' into its dimmed and hushed intimacy was at first slightly intimidating but ultimately extremely rewarding. The clear hierarchies that existed in the room at the beginning of the session had been broken down by the end through dialogue and through the act of listening. Participants were free to propose any topic that they wished for conversation and free to join or leave any of the simultaneous discussions that were going on across the room. With enough people to allow a range of discussions and voices and not too many to destroy the intimacy and immediacy of the conversation or to allow hierarchies of debate to develop the morning's resulting discourse felt refreshingly productive and remarkably democratic. Discussions inevitably turned to subject that united the group, passions and things that could be improved, indeed they all ultimately gravitated to the great political schism at the heart of the fringe – the bitter division between the big four 'comedy empires' and the rest of the venues and companies with the room clearly very much coming from the small, independent side of that divide. This is clearly a massive issue that could ultimately destroy the fringe as we know it, the democratic and innovative spirit at the heart of the festival being deliberately undermined and indeed full-on assaulted by powerful commercial interests. There is a growing disparity between the big-spending, populist venues with the financial muscle, political influence and PR resources and the experimental, independent, artistically challenging and innovative productions, often small scale, subversive and usually cheap if not free. Discussions turned to ways of combating this, speculations on the future or potential futures for the fringe and rather than simply bemoaning the state of affairs that innovative and subversive spirit surfaced through the collective pooling of imagination. The set up of

the event, incredibly open and open-ended enabled the self-organised group to address these issues in imaginative and exciting ways. Often inverting problems into solutions and through that exploring ways forward.

I found the entire event incredibly stimulating and was again reminded what a small world we inhabit, chatting to people who it transpired shared many connections and mutual acquaintances with me. I talked at length to one of the talented performers behind the star show of this year's fringe Trilogy and I found that the issues discussed in the main group fed back very productively into many ideas that are interesting me at the moment. I particularly found discussions surrounding culture as participation as opposed to product, different models for the dissemination and production of work and the alternative engagements and the differing dynamics that these models facilitate fascinating. The convergence of 'new folk' expression through web 2.0, the democratisation of production and the fragmenting of modernism's grand narratives as ushered in by post-structuralism absolutely established, traditional cultural hierarchies. This exciting new paradigm makes possible the rejection of the model of culture simply as one-way traffic and as a spectacle for consumption and makes intriguing alternatives conceivable.

Everything Must Go (or The Voluntary Attempt to Overcome Unnecessary Obstacles) (Beady Eye)

An utterly personal piece, Everything Must Go is hard to shoehorn into any specific genre of work, perhaps it would be best to call it an elegy. From a cynical marketing angle this show has the perfect hook – its central character and father of its creator died just weeks before the performance but it is going ahead anyway. Under normal circumstances it would be unthinkable to go on but this production regularly attempts to think the unthinkable and it is in fact perfectly fitting that it should go ahead.

The work, originally conceived as Kristin Fredricksson's tribute to her remarkable, elderly father Karl, gains massive resonance and power from the fact that this is tribute now played out to a man that is no longer with us. The fact that it wasn't originally written as such makes it all the more astounding and indeed moving.

The work takes an unconventional approach to the life of an unconventional man, Karl was an eccentric, a ballet dancer, a drag artist, a hurdler, a teacher and a loving father. He died in June this year. The work that at times feels more like live art than a piece of theatre combines a wide range of physical dynamics, myriad objects that are at once props and scenery (and even blur the line further arguably becoming characters/actors in their own right) as well as cleverly interspersed with giant cardboard cut-out photographs, projections and sections of footage from home movies. The stage is positively cluttered, much like the mental picture we are presented with of Karl the hoarder's idiosyncratic abode. Cleverly integrating props, visual and media elements, music, costume and movement Kristin skilfully breaks down temporal, emotional and physical barriers and indeed almost the barrier of death itself as we feel Karl is very much alive and in the room with us.

Something of a post-modern assemblage of styles and fragmented dramatic/artistic elements Kristin's collaged tribute waltzes unconventionally towards its devastating conclusion. As an audience we know what is coming but it does not prepare us for the power of the final scene when we are shown that however vividly this work might have brought Karl to life for the past hour he is ultimately very much gone. The simultaneous dance that Kristin slowly and thoughtfully traces across the stage, tenderly clasping a puppet effigy of her father, whilst projected behind her the exact same dance is taking

place in footage from an earlier version of the performance. This moving moment of intimacy between her and a frail but very much alive Karl makes his inescapable absence now hugely felt and leaves most of the audience in tears.

Uncomfortable as I feared I would be with the premise of this show with its potential to be mawkish, voyeuristic and exploitative I found myself completely disarmed by this heartbreakingly genuine and touchingly assembled tribute. My only fear would be the effect that going through such a raw and emotionally exhausting performance every day for the duration of the festival might have on its creator. It is also difficult to speculate from a piece so truly personal and in which form and content are so utterly and inextricably linked whether such a successful work may be repeatable, it will be fascinating to see what Kristin produces next.

East (Castle Theatre Company)

An ebullient and arresting performance that bursts from the stage with the immense energy of the youthful cast. Clad in leathers and caked in black and white greasepaint, somewhere between teddy boys, mimes and Kiss, they delight in the leer and the grimace, strutting and fretting their hour upon the stage. The fast-paced and poetic delivery of Berkoff's sparkling dialectal dialogue is dazzling. The power of the language mesmerising, humorous and brutal. In an aural space between cockney slang and Shakespearean verse the rhythm and emphatic expressiveness of the lines is brilliant, delivered with genuine venom and swagger.

This production from Castle Theatre, a Durham student company, is very tight and never loses its focus or momentum. This is no light-hearted affair: covering such subject matter as with rape, fascism and savage violence but always with a skilled and seemingly effortless deftness of touch that does not take away from the play's exuberance or its moments of real humour. The world of a bygone East End, perhaps one that never really existed, is mythologised for us here, warts and all. It is a world of violence and suffering but also of pride and identity, its exaggerated characters are transformed for us into the heroes (or anti-heroes) of a Shakespearean history, a Greek tragedy, or in the high melodrama of early silent film. This effect is compounded by the mime-like make-up, the exaggerated action and the constantly hammy live accompaniment of the obligatory East End tunes banged out on the piano in the corner. Indeed at one point we are actually presented with an interjection of a piece of film, shot in the very style of a silent film, retelling part of the tale, as if to make the parallels still more apparent. It does work however as the humour and convincing nature of the footage carry it through.

Whilst not shocking or particularly profound the production is in equal measure grotesque, witty and incredibly entertaining with some truly outstanding acting and an innovative and stylish delivery.

Emeka Ene (Emeka Ene)

I managed to catch a brief set of three pieces by this incredibly talented and effortlessly stylish performance poet as a little interjection into the Story Pirates comedy set on the Free Fringe at Dragonfly. The tag line 'young, gifted and black' could well have been written for this charismatic and skilful performer. I mention his race here only for the fact that I found his most exciting and original piece of the three that he performed for us was addressing this very issue. Whilst I would not wish to define him as a 'black poet' I found this poem on the issue of his race particularly well observed, witty, biting and insightful with some truly dazzling turns of phrase (who could forget once heard for instance his line 'I have a dream that one day I'll be judged by the content of my character not the

skinniness of my jeans?'). I found the poem particularly exciting in the way it conveyed the attitudes of a young man, content in his skin, if not in his clothes and how it turned on their heads the usually issues of race in order to examine black stereotypes and pressure from within his own peer group to define himself in a way that he simply did not wish to be defined. His refusal to apologise for his educated and cultured background, seemingly at odds with the racial expectations placed upon him by his peers was particularly compelling.

This was a topic that came across in another of his poems during which he talked of his poetic compulsion and ability in terms reminiscent of the classic, time-honoured genre of the poet's boast that runs through English language poetry from Beowulf right through to urban American street culture. His tone was elegant, intelligent and witty but recalled rather neatly the form and the bravado of the hip-hop star boasting of their own talents in a street corner slam.

His last poem was a love poem of sorts, regarding his ultimately fruitless attempts to win a certain eulogised object of his affections. Contrasting with the apparently self-assured nature displayed in the other pieces this hinted at a vulnerability and a self-deprecating humour. Again its tone was witty, unconventional and very self-aware.

All in all I found all the works to be incredibly well written, entertainingly delivered, clever and sharply observed pieces. All with a confidence of voice and clarity of narrative carried swiftly along by a mastery of rhythm and poise of tone that belied his young years. I don't think he knows just how good he is, perhaps to do so might disrupt the fascinating balance in the work between bravado and self-doubt. I met him a couple of days later, flying his comedy show on the Royal Mile. I told him how much I had enjoyed his poetry and he said that he wasn't really that confident in it and he didn't think it was that special, he said that I should see his comedy work as that was where his real talent lay. I don't know if this was just a sales technique ('sales' in the widest possible sense – this being the free fringe!) but I went to see his comedy and I would have to disagree with him. If he wants it I believe this extremely talented young poet has what it takes to be very big indeed.

Etty (Susan Stein)

Susan Stein's immersive and expressive performance as Etty flits idiosyncratically through a flick-book of temporal and emotional postcards, bringing to life vivid moments in the intimate inner life of this beautifully captured character. Etty is brought to us perfectly with a delicate and enthused delivery, at once tentative and yet warm and very human. It is this affectionate and incredibly personal infusion of humanity that gives the performance its power. Etty is shown as a vivacious personality, very much an individual, with hopes, desires and fears. Her attempts to live beneath the shadow of what awaits her, neatly encapsulated in the ominous, impending suitcase that sits at her side throughout, inspire both empathy and pathos. Her snapshots of life, sparkling with moments of humour and saturated with an underlying sense of powerlessness and inevitability, guide us towards the looming conclusion. Though Etty's choices it challenges us to confront our actions as human beings, with our lives and individuality so inconsequential before the brutal and inescapable face of state power. In this respect the piece remains vitally relevant with Etty's modest voice, not as a poet but as an individual, her only method of resistance against the dehumanising power of the totalitarian machine. With this she brings to life one human face amongst faceless millions and reminds us that when we stop seeing people as individuals we open the door to a very dark place.

The Golden Hour @ Forest (Various)

Its hard to really give an opinion about this bustling and exciting night in the Forest Cafe Bar at Forest Fringe as it was so varied and my memory of it is slightly obscured by the number of bottles of Joker IPA that I consumed during the event. Suffice to say it ranged from folk to live performance dance music and poetry and I very much enjoyed myself. So much so I bought a CD of past Golden Hour performances and its actually really good and I certainly do not regret my purchase.

Guru Guru (Rotozaza)

Guru Guru was an experience like no other. 'Theatre' doesn't come close to describing it, nor 'event', nor even 'performance art' this was truly an immersive and consciousness-altering experience: what is technically termed 'a head-fuck'. Rotozaza has been innovating and exploring the use of giving live instruction to unrehearsed performers. This was to develop into what they refer to as their 'Autoteatro' strategy through which participants exchange audience roles for performance, following remote instruction, via headphones.

Guru Guru does not stop here, the five participants are led down into an intimate, surreal space, brightly lit and reminiscent of a futuristic dentists surgery with overtones of corporate, minimalist industrial design. In this space, bemused and blinking in the light, the participants are given no explanation and placed in a suggestible state as they begin to receive instructions through the earphones. As well as interacting with one another the participants interact with an artificial intelligence that starts (like the headphones) as a disembodied voice but slowly and mesmerically builds a face through suggestion upon a screen before them. The computer character/actor addresses the participants like a therapist, cleverly working the confusion of the group to his advantage to make more suggestions upon them and subtly competing and playing off against the still disembodied headphone voice. This is subtly and remarkably effective to the extent that whilst wary of the computer character we become almost unaware of the headphone voice so that its instructions become almost second nature.

As the experience develops and unfolds we find ourselves facilitating a surprising level of characterisation in the participants. Slowly the computer guru begins to develop glitches and bugs as our built up reliance on 'him' is systematically deconstructed and the initial clarity of instruction that manipulated our confusion now gives way to a disturbing and baffling chaos of digital interference. We are left at the end in shock and awe, enraptured and yet emotionally and mentally exhausted, unsure of where to turn, unable to speak for some minutes without the prompts in our ears.

This doesn't just break down traditional models of audience and participant, commodity and experience, it puts an improvised explosive device under them and blasts them out of town. This was like nothing else, profound, moving, challenging, incredibly thought-provoking and truly thrilling.

Love Letters Straight From Your Heart (Uninvited Guest)

Simple, profound, all-encompassing and euphoric, Uninvited Guests beautiful piece is like the theatrical equivalent of MDMA. Indeed, with the aid of a couple of glasses of Cava, the audience/participants are left intoxicated on life itself and fallen head over heels in love with this piece.

The disarming lack of pretension and the unapologetically kitsch sentimentality with

which it woos us can not fail to win us over, even those with initial reservations. The audience swiftly acquiesces, overcoming embarrassments and by the end are effulgent in their outpourings of love and emotional discharge. Through a tried and tested line-up of affecting devices (from power ballads to flowers, party-poppers and toasts to our loved ones) the work lulls and excites its audience through stages to the point of letting go their inhibitions and outpouring their newly liberated feelings, dancing with strangers in the centre of the room.

We are seated at a long circling table with a space at its centre. There is a careful balance of formality and intimacy as the two performers take their seats opposite each other at the heads of the table. After the briefest of scene-setting introductions performers Jess Hoffmann and Richard Dufty readily set about taking turns at tendering seducing and lovingly manipulating our emotions until we are putty in their hands. We are treated to a nostalgic and tear-jerking procession of anonymous musical dedications supplied by ourselves, the audience, in a format reminiscent of Simon Bates' daily *Our Tune* piece that used to add a hefty slice of cheese to the fondue that was Radio 1 fifteen years ago (and still is today).

They take us through all the shades of love, the first ecstatic flush, the harrowing pain of its enforced absence, through romantic, sexual, friendship and familial love. Hints of a narrative and an ambiguous relationship between the two performers build as the audience's dedications bring us together to feel part of something bigger and something special.

The work ends in the ecstasy of release and we feel swept up in it all as the performers embrace, we dance and leave on a high, unable to help but smile at strangers.

The piece works through its engagement, its involvement of the audience as contributory participants, we feel we have a stake, we are part of something. This was a common theme running through the majority of the pieces that truly impressed me this year. Love Letters was simply beautiful, a definite for my top three this year.

Seaspray and Cuckoo Spit (Eyes Wide Theatre Company)

Overacted and ruined by the insistence on playing the whole thing with dubious West Country accents, this work deals a bereaved family in a small fishing village. The family is having difficulty coming to terms with the death of their son/brother and attempting subconsciously to replace him by taking in a mysterious stranger found ship-wrecked on the shore outside their home. The story and characters are obvious, stereotypical and two-dimensional, the acting is on the whole melodramatic and banal, the narrative is laboured and the writing clichéd. Alex Marieka Hanly performance as the teenage daughter is passable and the piece is partially redeemed by some mesmerising moments of physical movement that give an atmospheric dimension to the dream/fantasy sequences. It is not enough however ultimately to make up for the uninspiring remainder of the piece. The ending is hackneyed and silly. Not the worst thing I've seen but very far from the best.

Single Cell @ Forest (Single Cell)

Embarrassingly enough a good amount of time has passed between me seeing this and me writing this down and in that time I have largely forgotten everything about it. A collective front for Manchester musicians, I can vaguely recall one of the acts from Single Cell making an impressive use of the live mixing of electronic elements and guitar playing in order to produce interesting and innovative house style music. I can not however remember enough to comment fairly. Sorry.

Sporadical (Little Bulb)

Little Bulb are back at Edinburgh and this year with the honour of being Forest Fringe's company in residence for 2009. Following up last year's storming success *Crocospia*, with its Fringe First and Total Theatre Award in tow, this was never going to be easy but they have managed to come back with something fresh, novel and positively euphoric for good measure. This fragile, low-fi and ingenious work manages to bring a gorgeous warmth and intimacy to the intriguing 'epic folk-opera' billing. Quaint and exuberant, we are charmed out of our seats by a beautifully constructed shambles, confident in the knowledge that behind the endearing amateurism these are consummate dramatists.

Using the conceit of a family reunion the audience are given name badges at the box office by use of which the actors greet us excitedly at the door like long lost relatives. We go into the bustling space, tealights on tables, encouraged to get drinks from the bar and chat as if this were a real reunion. Everything feels friendly and inclusive, we do indeed begin to feel like part of the family.

The performance gets under way with warm and hearty greetings all round, a member of the audience appearing to be a favourite uncle reads a prepared statement and off we launch. We jump headlong into an irresistible, witty hour of captivating folk ditties played with surprising musical aplomb, scintillating humour complete quick-witted improvised touches and some dazzlingly versatile displays of acting. It is all carried off from every inch of the space with protean resourcefulness, in amongst the audience with something of a ramshackle majesty. The fact that there is no ticket price to be paid works masterfully with the inclusive, carefully placed elements of audience participation that feel wonderfully natural and unforced and are compounded by the warm atmosphere of the 'family reunion'. By combining these dynamics the piece succeeds brilliantly in de-contextualising itself as a piece of 'theatre' - as a product for consumption - instead we have a stake in it, we accompany the actors on their epic narrative journey as if it were our own. Indeed the true success of the piece is evident in the way that the actors cease to be 'actors' at all and quickly feel more like, if not family members, then at least friends.

The wonderful atmosphere of make-believe with the cardboard props and furniture-cum-ships unlocks the childish imagination in all of us and disbelief is not only suspended but indeed totally given the boot. We feel returned to perhaps the most fundamental form of theatre, that of childhood play. The alluring, participatory exuberance is overwhelming and with its catchy, sing-along sea shanties gone straight to our heads we leave feeling intoxicated and enamoured with the genuine joy of being part of something. Professionalism no doubt has a vital place but this show takes that and locates it firmly in the amateur aesthetic and dynamic, de-constructing the barriers between audience and performance. We give as much as we get to this event, for it is an event as opposed to a show. This is not one way traffic, it gives us a stake in its own success, as all the best cultural phenomena should, and through this it achieves a sense of community and whole-hearted gusto that not only takes theatre back to where it should be but also shows us its future. One of my top three pieces this year.

The Overcoat (Gecko)

Gogol's troubling tale is brought to the stage here by Gecko. It is a fulgurant and virtuosic explosion of imagery that subsumes the power of previous ballet and mime adaptations into a visual spectacle that can not help but thrill.

This is the tragic tale of Akaky, downtrodden office clerk, humiliated and belittled by his colleagues as he slaves away in a chillingly portrayed office. The staging makes much of the de-humanised nature of his situation and through the mechanical, almost maniacal movements of the office production line and the breathless repetition of his commute. The luscious use of lighting, smoke and sound bedazzles us into a trance through which we are carried along by the hurtling action that unfolds before us.

Caught up in Akaky's Faustian temptation, we like he, feel the panacea for his crushing alienation is the coveted overcoat which craves and aspires to. The production, makes much of the moral, the temptation of the devilish tailor and his impossibly desirable coat. The supernatural elements in the tale are hinted at through atmosphere (although the somewhat unnecessary ghostly interjections from the end of the story are usefully minimised and mostly omitted here). The diabolic contrast between Akaky's grinding poverty; his lonely, dismal lodgings; miserable, unfulfilling work and the all-encompassing promise of the overcoat is cleverly portrayed. The clever use of a depressing sexual episode with his landlady, upon which the ingenious bed literally swallows him up, provides the nadir of his pathetic, claustrophobic existence.

The major deviation that this production makes from Gogol's tale is the innovative introduction of a female character as the object of Akaky's affection. This intelligent insertion, serves to at once compound the moralising elements of the narrative whilst providing an important psycho-sexual dimension to the character's motivation and underscoring his humiliation.

The exquisitely lit coat hangs ominously above the stage, enchanting and bewildering, as much in the audience's mind as Akaky's. It is a sinister and captivating image, one of many astounding visual tableaux that are the chief strength of this production. The use of startling imagery is only compounded by the unrelenting and gymnastic physicality of the action and by the sparing and mostly indecipherable dialogue.

For all the stunning design, for which Ti Green should be richly lauded, my only criticism would lie in the relative lack of political engagement that the piece provides. Taking a moral, rather than political stance in the main I should have perhaps liked to have seen more overt engagements with the inherent ideas of alienation, capitalist spectacle and the economic and political implications of desire and commodity. Gogol's work was extremely innovative, long pre-dating Georg Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* with its systematic definitions of economic value and the exchange of sacrifices. Indeed it even pre-dated Marx's *Kapital* by over twenty years. Perhaps then to place a Marxist agenda upon the work is unfounded, however to not engage with the clear overtones certainly misses a trick. It appears still more of an oversight when one considers that the commodity of the overcoat in the tale forms a rather fitting allegory to this production itself. Both offer a bedazzling spectacle, lush and slick and desirable and here at the heart of the Pleasance empire we too are being conscripted with spectacle to imbue this product with value. A value that is transient and does little, in the way that say Little Bulb's *Sporadical* does, to truly allay our alienation. Like Akaky's ghost, we leave somewhat dazed.

Metamorphosis (Cambridge University ADC)

Continuing with allegory, we can draw parallels between *The Overcoat* and Berkoff's adaptation of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* on many levels. Again this is the tale of a hard-working young man, in this case Gregor Samsa, who finds himself alienated by the de-humanising nature of his work. His prime concerns when discovering his new etymological form are how he will continue to work, his most profound recognition is that of his total alienation from social and familial life. Indeed the whole work could be seen as an allegory for the alienating condition of capitalist labour.

Directed by Max Barton, Cambridge Uni ADC's production of *Metamorphosis* is surreal, attention-grabbing and well presented. The particularly innovative and effective use of scaffolding bars as a sort of climbing frame set placed the action on many levels and was a stand out feature. The audience were captivated by a chorus line of actors-cum-scenery lurching and scuttling up and down the bars like insects in a display of accomplished physical virtuosity. The acting was a touch over the top at times with a circus-like feel but the direction was faultless creating a fast-paced and stimulating performance.

The Petty Concerns of Luke Wright (Luke Wright)

Performance poet and comedian Luke Wright provided us with an occasionally hilarious though more often mildly amusing narrative backdrop to a rather sparse collection of poetry. The poems were good if not excellent, indeed this could be a fair assessment of the entire show. Some occasional elements were truly very funny, particularly his scathing deconstruction of his own naïve adolescent poetry.

The show, like his poetry, was extremely well observed with me for one finding multiple moments of cringing recognition in the self-deprecating analysis to which he subjects his behaviour. This is *The Petty Concerns of Luke Wright*, an incredibly apt title. I could not help but feel that although the show makes no claims to be anything else, the very small and personal focus, indeed at times touching on that pettiness and self-obsession he professes to tackle, means that this show could at best only ever hope to be good, never great. I found it frustrating that Wright's clear lyrical abilities could not be directed towards some topic outside of his own immediate life, there was an over-concern with popular culture and celebrity and the wit of the poems carried them slightly when the subject matter was found to be fairly thin and obvious. Conversely my favourite poem of the set, who's title regrettably escapes me, was the most personal at all. This poem was painfully personal, dealing with his vulnerability and occasional self-loathing and was removed from the self-conscious references to popular culture, dealing merely with his own insecurities.

Over all Wright was funny and insightful although I couldn't help but feel the self-conscious irony in his persona was a little too forced at times and that he was potentially too self-aware for his own good.

Power Plant (Mark Anderson, Anne Bean, Jony Easterby, Kirsten Reynolds, Ulf Pedersen, Christine Leboutte)

Something of the primeval jungle haunts this piece. No doubt the jungle at night was a place to be very wary of for our ancient ancestors and I don't doubt that this has manifested itself somewhere in our collective unconscious, providing experiences such as this with much of their uncanny power. This was *Day of the Triffids*, this was being lost deep in a fairytale forest at midnight, this was Wonderland come to the city. All of the magical, astonishing things that you supposed as a child went on after dark in the distant woods are presented for you here in a powerful, intimately secretive and yet spectacularly overpowering way. The surreal and uneasy situation of the glass house at night, the thick warmth, the heady smell, the muffled sounds and heavy darkness that looms and closes from all sides is powerful, its anthropomorphic and exotic plants enveloping you as you nervously creep through their midst. This is a powerful and moving environment, brought magically to life with surreal and wondrous interventions of light.

Mark Anderson, Anne Bean, Jony Eastserby, Ulf Mark Pedersen and Kirsten Reynolds combine light and sound to compliment and transform this enchanted wonderland into a

constantly unfolding labyrinth of marvels. Glitter balls in the trees cast fluttering fairy-like gleams across the canopy, flames leap and dance in a symphony of low moans and cries, neon hums and sings, projections cast kaleidoscopic snail forms into the black. There is a true surreal magic, something otherworldly and alien about this place that makes you feel that you've stepped onto another planet. You could get lost in this place for hours, the dramatic colour-tinged stream split with staves of light as you wander, aimless, like the star of your own film: fractured, dream-like narratives playing and tumbling through you head. Awesome, magical and uncanny, it makes us feel like children again, overcome with wonder. A stunning piece of work.

Up (Return to Work)

Laurie Brown was nominated for the Stage Award for best solo performer for this piece and its not hard to see why. Straight out of uni, Laurie puts more experienced actors to shame with his excellent, varied and nuanced performance as psychiatric patient Robert. Robert's character is brought to life with humour, pathos and a brilliant, nervy manner that fits him perfectly. Brown's considerable acting ability comes together with James Ley's brilliantly paced, dynamic and intelligent script and Rosalind Sydney's deft direction. The result is an immensely believable, uncomfortable and enjoyable portrayal of the complicated and fascinating Robert.

The character and narrative are revealed to us piece by piece from the fevered rantings and recollections of Robert as he struggles to come to terms with his situation, his own actions and the unsteady conviction that he wishes to take his own life.

It is a humorous, disturbing, intelligent, sensitive and truly naturalistic depiction of mental breakdown. The piece works its way beautifully through comic touches and moments of cringing repugnance, fear and revulsion towards a highly dramatic and brilliant conclusion.

Utter! Dead Poets and Puppets Society (Lance Pierson, James McKay, Mab Jones, Richard Tyrone Jones)

Sylvia Plath's life and work through puppets. It sounds as though it could be awful but it wasn't. This was an hilarious and satirical look at both the works and the character of both Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath with a substantial dose of their poetry thrown in for good measure. For those familiar with the pairs lives and relationship, particularly as told through Hughes' *Birthday Letters*, this was a wry, clever and extremely funny caricature with Richard Tyrone Jones sending up Ted Hughes marvellously.

Joined by other dead poets, Hughes and Plath provided the backdrop for some beautiful and richly performed John Betjeman from Lance Pierson. There followed a dramatic, intense and expressive recital of Poe's *The Raven* by James McKay, spectacularly and hilariously punctured by the restrained use of a puppet raven. Lastly there was Welsh poet Mab Jones' novel and amusing re-evaluation of a number of Taliesin's works which I very much enjoyed, being works that I am particularly fond of, and beyond the humour and the Welsh stereotypes the magic of a poetry, far, far too rarely brought out in Welsh, let alone English, shone.

This was an event that relied heavily on the audience's familiarity with the poets in question for the basis of a lot of its humour, however the jokes were general enough and the poetry performed with enough talent to convey the true power of the words, so much so that I am sure it was a show that could have been enjoyed by anyone.

Tank Man (Reeling and Writhing)

A lot of people seem to dislike Anthony Gormley's *One and Other*, his fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. I don't. I think it is a wonderfully timely engagement with the Zeitgeist of 'user-generated content', web 2.0 and cultural phenomena such as the Xfactor married with deeper connotations of the nature of art and artist in a Post-Structuralist, Post-Modernist epoch. Everybody wants their fifteen minutes of fame and Gormley gives it to them, once more demonstrating his talent to enthuse and captivate the public imagination in a way that few other artists, if any, working in the UK today can.

'Tank Man' is a short performance piece by Tim Nunn, that was actually written during a tenancy on Gormley's plinth. A one person show comprising only a series of repetitive and cryptic movements that appear to be inspired by a protester from the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising in Beijing.

Gillian Lees performs the short physical piece that touches tantalisingly at times upon visual poetry although somehow never quite succeeds for me. I was glad to have seen it but perhaps it would have more resonance and power if put back on its plinth, not in Tiananmen, but at the heart of that other famous square in which protesters from closer to home are frequently corralled and restricted and bullied by agents of the state.

The Moment I Saw You I Knew I Could Love You (Curious)

A beautiful, ambitious and truly innovative work in progress that tailed off a little towards the end but that was punctuated by some genuinely stunning moments. *The moment I saw you I knew I could love you* from Curious combined cinematography with some incredible intimate moments of live performance, unfolding moments of virtually one-to-one experience with members of the strictly limited audience of six. Poetic and evocative, these included a figure in fencing attire tracing handwriting across the floor of the darkened room with water on a tiny sponge at the end of his rapier. At one point a tiny projection was delicately placed upon my outstretched palm as the group huddled around in the darkness to view as if I was cupping a fragile butterfly. In fact it was a sensitively filmed miniature tale of a woman floating dream-like, recalling Malory, Tenneyson and Waterhouses' *Lady of Shalot*, adrift upon a lilo upon the sea. In another moment we circle around one of the performers who takes an ultrasonic device to her chest and allows us each in turn to cradle the small, hand-held screen bearing her beating heart in our hands. Some of these passages were immensely intimate and intense. After such beautiful moments the concluding section where we were merely lined up upon chairs to watch a projection on a big screen didn't work for me and was a low point of an otherwise exquisite, elegant and tender performance.

Unfolding King Lear a Model (Incarnate)

This is a tiny one man show, truly a one man show: not only the sole deviser and performer, Jeremy Hardingham also operates his own sound and lighting desk as well. For a one man show however this piece quickly seemed to build quite a buzz around it amongst a few notable critics (I held the door open for Lyn Gardner from the Guardian on my way in). Lyn went on to call it "Terrifying, painful and utterly compelling" and having got passed the extremely unconventional and avant garde nature of the work I would indeed have to agree.

On first sight of the set I began to feel uneasy, a wooden work bench, an array of tools and dangerous, ominous looking objects that cluttered and haunted the stage. Hardingham riffled and flitted distractedly between props, frenzied and uneasy, picking up first this item then the next. To the accompaniment of oppressive white noise he hung a blackboard around his neck and smeared white grease paint over his face. Wrapping gaffa tape roughly about his face in an uncomfortable and vicious fashion he proceeded to savagely hack a hole where his mouth was with a pair of scissors. The whole piece continued in this agonising fashion, the audience never quite knowing if he was about to deliberately or accidentally inflict some cruel injury upon himself. The sheer tension and painful physicality of much of the performance kept up a breathless suspense and was emotionally draining in the extreme.

Having thus barbarously deconstructed his appearance he took out a ream of paper and began to read. He read words and lines slashed from the text of King Lear, spat, mumbled and ripped through, his soft, middle-class voice at odds with the broken fragments of brutality that surrounded him. He read at a frenzied pace, the words barely intelligible, yet somehow retaining their poetic resonance. One of the most disconcerting things for me was the way the words were very much read as opposed to acted in the conventional sense. I realised that this expectation must be so deeply engrained in me that I had great trouble not feeling uneasy with it.

He continued his unnerving twitching and fiddling about the work bench, all of which seemed fairly haphazard and without any real relation to the spoken words. The major deviation from this came at the play's ultimate apogee of horror, that of Gloucester blinding. This moment saw Gloucester signified by fragile light bulb, clamped tensely with a sense impending destruction into some form of vice. A soundtrack of unpleasant sounding, tortuous, metallic noises and recorded speech accompanied this state of suspended high tension. We felt at any moment the bulb could shatter shower Hardingham, and indeed us, in jagged fragments of broken glass. Hardingham assaulted the bulb with all manner of horrific objects, increasingly swinging an axe around unnervingly before dousing the cowering bulb in crimson stage blood. This whole passage was deeply disturbing and indeed very difficult to watch.

The horrific conclusion saw Hardingham force-feed himself handfuls of salt and then attempt to deliver his lines whilst retching and threatening to vomit. Its incredibly difficult to know what to make of the work, I was left bemused and drained. Stripped of any obvious pointers towards a particular interpretation or conclusion I am left with merely my physical and emotional reactions to the piece and possibly this was Hardingham's ultimate intention.

Vagina Monologues (Hill College Theatre Company Durham)

I only managed to see a short preview of this work, in the difficult circumstances of a busy bar. The monologue that I saw was delivered professionally and skilfully. The performance was candid, carefully pitched and well acted and managed to hold the attention in a very distracting environment. It is just a shame that I didn't get to see the full performance, it was possibly equally as good considering that it managed to sell out the venue every night.

A Western (Action Hero)

A deadpan and systematic deconstruction of the western genre, this intriguing show from

Action Hero utilises no scenery, minimal props and has young actors Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse playing a number of related roles. From next to nothing they bring to life an imaginative game, conjuring up the sweeping scale and high drama of the western, all with a disarming earnestness like children playing at cowboys.

We are taken on a journey with a wit so dry it hurts. The whole thing is conducted in such an utterly matter of fact manner that the apparent ridiculousness of two grown adults running around playing make believe is swiftly suspended. We watch each cliché unfold before us in quick succession: the hero's ride into town, the whisky sliding down the bar, the duel at sundown, the card table overturned. There is a narrative, although it is disrupted, cut and pasted, some sections repeated, as befits the 'homemade' aesthetic of this western. It is as if we are kids that have shot an amateur homemovie version of their favourite western, all of the scenes are in the can and now we can sit down and review the reel: editors cutting and splicing the various scenes together for affect. The melodramatic scene that sees the hero's ketchup-drenched lover dying in his arms is repeated over and over to multiply its impact.

The piece builds towards its inevitable conclusion as we, the audience, take up the last of our many roles in the work. Throughout we have been asked to play this game of make-believe with the actors and now we must make our final contribution. Purposefully we draw our figure-revolvers and take aim, finally mowing down our hero in a slow-motion hail of invisible bullets.

The work is a witty and interesting deconstruction of genre and narrative that owes much to cinema, not merely in its subject matter but in its structure and fractured narrative also. Whilst I found the piece an intriguing intellectual exercise I was not especially moved by its matter-of-fact tone and was left slightly disengaged emotionally with what was an otherwise successful work.

Witches Night @ Forest Cafe (Various)

A selection of performers taking to the stage in the Forest Cafe to present a variety of works upon the general theme of witches. There was poetry, folk music and story telling but unfortunately, but for about twenty seconds of vaguely pleasant harp playing, this was complete trash. The 'poetry' was a horribly literal, talentless retelling of a piece of classic neo-pagan revisionism based upon no historical evidence whatsoever claiming that tens of millions of peace-loving witches were systematically exterminated in some kind of patriarchal genocide. If this was vaguely insulting then the storytelling was aimless and unfocussed, delivered seemingly without the slightest conception of structure or what makes a good story in the first place. We soon left, diabolical.

Words and Pictures (Third Angel)

Words and Pictures was another piece from Alex Kelly's vehicle Third Angel and much like his other show at Forest *Class of 76* this work was lecture-based and not short on warmth. The delightful and intriguing premise of a book tour with readings from an unwritten book is essentially just a clever way of presenting a selection of short stories in lecture format. However to label them short stories would be a little disingenuous, it might be perhaps be more accurate to call them simply anecdotes or speculative musings, there is narrative for sure but its digressive and discursive. Aside from the 'stories' themselves we have their background structure which operates out of the book tour premise. The tales are often fleshed out with a little background information about their circumstances, we have an

introduction and some short passages sit between the anecdotes connecting the whole lot together into some coherent whole. The format is not too distant from stand up comedy but whilst still amusing this is essentially not comedy as such but merely an interesting man telling us interesting things. The whole performance is intelligently linked and integrated with supporting visuals behind and it is this that gives the piece its lecture-like feel.

We are treated to tales of empty benches, standing on the highest diving board as a child, the rules of marbles and the fate of Scottish jellyfish. There are strong elements of self-deprecating humour and nostalgia at work here, we instantly warm to Alex and are drawn into his consummate performance that can make even the most mundane of topics fascinating. Delivered with charm and no shortage of amusement, these are funny, fascinating, well written tales. I can not help but wonder if the book will ever come to light one day but can't help but feel that if it did it would be missing one of the integral elements that makes this piece such a success: the presence of Alex Kelly.

Comedy

An Improvised History of Absolutely Everything (Project Steve)

An Improvised History of Absolutely Everything attempted to make improvised comedy from audience prompted historical events. The trouble was that although their historical knowledge might have been mildly impressive the comedy wasn't particularly funny. There was also way too much not very tuneful singing involved with some rather disappointing improvised rhyming. There were several occasions when the actors searched blankly for an appropriate rhyme where you felt one was staring them in the face. If you are going to do improvisation make sure you have some innate ability first. It was fine and fairly inoffensive, it just didn't make me laugh.

Christopher Fairweather (Christopher Fairweather)

"In poems, prose and satirical songs, Christopher Fairweather takes a hilarious look at problems facing Britain". Where to start. You have to feel sorry for this guy, he clearly has mental health issues, his press release should however be retracted under some kind of law governing false advertising. It promotes a show that purports to offer poetry, satire and hilarity. In fact it offers none of the above only a garbled and truly cringe worthy performance to which in the end the poor chap couldn't even give the tickets away. It tries excruciatingly hard to be funny and really isn't in any shape or form. It was his first time performing at the fringe and I would suggest if only out of kindness, that he makes it his last.

Forty Five Minutes to Save the World (James & Nidal Agha, Toby Brown, Mark Restuccia)

"A bold claim?" Says their press release, referring to the show's title, and if it were the case that this show was charged with saving the world then I regret to say that we would all be doomed. It goes on to make an even bolder claim "after stand-up from James and Nidal Agha- Mark Restuccia and Toby Brown you will never see things the same again". Perhaps in the sense that this was forty-five minutes of my life I can never get back. There were occasional chuckles. I'll leave it at that.

Peggy Weight Champion of the World (the Marvellous Dorians)

A two man show in which Peggy (a secret Nigerian prince) dreams of becoming aWWF

Champion whilst his friend and the constant target of his antagonism Toby (an ex-public schoolboy) just wants his ex-girlfriend back. There are some occasional sparkles of humour in an otherwise bland and overly long show. It is rather too heavily reliant upon style over substance and on glamour and quirky fantasy, very much in the mould of the Mighty Boosh at a time when that is going somewhat out of fashion. It is still almost carried off by the charisma of its actors alone - almost but not quite - it just isn't funny enough. It was however free and still worth seeing, even if taking place in the Caves on a sticky August night that made this feel like the most swelteringly hot venue in Edinburgh. Emeka Ene should concentrate on his poetry in my humble opinion whilst for comedy I ran off immediately afterwards to catch his friends and sometime collaborators, the much funnier Story Pirates over at Dragonfly.

Pecker and Foof Save the World (Dan Thompson & Jessica Fostekew)

Having been rather harsh in my assessment of the above show and its levels of humour I don't really know where to go with this one. I don't wish to be too negative or derogatory as there were occasional funny moments and frequent moments that should have been funny, but somehow weren't. It seemed like the kind of show that was probably pretty funny on paper but somehow when it came to it it just didn't quite work. Possibly just too scripted and rehearsed, there didn't seem too much life to it. It can't have helped that I made a mistake and thinking that something else was on I inadvertently went to see it for a second time but couldn't leave as it was in the tiny back room at Dragonfly and me and my companions made up three of the audience of seven. I then had to sit through the exact same show, word for word, even the delivery was the same. I know it is unfair as it is not meant to be seen twice but that second time was excruciating and has perhaps coloured my opinion of the whole thing. After all Time Out called it "intensely funny", I have to say I didn't agree.

Tom Bell (Tom Bell)

A frantic, surreal and headlong rush of really rather hilarious material that I had the pleasure of seeing shoe-horned into a ten minute break in a Story Pirates show. Also playing at the Pleasance Courtyard and Rowan Caves it was great to see him for free in the Dragonfly filling this tiny slot with such a high level of laughs and adding to what was already a truly great night of comedy. I'd definitely go and see his full show next time.

Vary Tales (Shellshock!)

Charmingly unpretentious and light-hearted, it was an easy going, well paced piece of improvised comedy that contained nothing stand-out but was nevertheless entertaining and enjoyable. There were some moments of real humour and clever wit along with a cast of loveable young guys from Durham University that the audience just couldn't help but warm to. Its hard to get a fair picture of an improvised comedy show from one performance as it is inevitably quite different each day but the show that I saw definitely kept me mildly amused for an hour and was certainly funnier than a lot of what passes for comedy both in Edinburgh and elsewhere.

The Story Pirates Present (Story Pirates)

An anarchic, stylish evening of improvised comedy, this show is high energy, high volume and highly sexed. It somehow manages to achieve a difficult balance of intelligent, quick and witty humour with filthy playground level antics. There is dancing, there is chaotic audience interaction, there are literary references (when was the last time you saw a

comedy sketch told from the perspective of Raskolnikov?) and somehow each scene seems to end in the actors clasped in a passionate embrace. The main advantage of this show however is that it is actually funny, real side-splitting, eye-watering funny. I find it amazing that the comedy empires can sit back smugly as punters snap up fifteen pound tickets to their over-hyped acts, who's contrived quirky expressions stare at you infuriatingly from every damn billboard in Edinburgh and the majority of whom are incredibly unfunny whilst this blazes so brightly in the backrooms of the Free Fringe. Brilliant comedy, brilliant value. I went back three times.

Visual Arts

Alexander Hamilton, Studio 11

This small show of works taking place in the studio of artist Alexander Hamilton initially attracted my attention through the references found in its publicity concerning Hamilton's relationship to artist Joseph Beuys. Beuys' interest in giving visual form to a creative practice opened the way somewhat for processed-based work. By placing a particular value upon the artist's conceptual journey he went some way to de-comodifying artistic output and these elements of his legacy have been influential for Hamilton. It was however difficult to see much of this in this particular exhibition in which the dazzling, gem-like brilliance of his meticulous Cyanotypes stole the show. The Beuys connection seemed an aside that whilst it got me through the door bore little relevance to the work on display. I was fortunate enough to meet Hamilton and he could talk me through some of the work. Little explanation however was needed for the sheer elegance and simplicity of the Cyanotypes that at once echoed a nostalgic memory of early photography, the patient detail of natural history studies and the cool minimalism of much contemporary design.

Ballast - Bringing the Stones Home, National Museum of Scotland (John Edgar)

Using stone taken from various historic quarries in Scotland, New Zealand artist John Edgar made sculptures based on topographical and cartographic imagery. He attempts to reference voyages and journeys, arrivals and departures and common elements found in the cultures of both Scotland and New Zealand. Very much tied to the Year of Homecoming this show feels like it's been commissioned to fulfil a very simplistic brief of celebrating Scotland's connection to the rest of the world in a very literal and easy to grasp fashion. This may or may not be the case but for me the show is nothing new and fails to make an impact.

Bob and Roberta Smith- This Artist is Deeply Dangerous, Hawke & Hunter

Bob and Roberta Smith's folkishly painted wooden boards and panels hang somewhat at odds to the high-style, extravagant interior of the Hawke and Hunter bar. In contrast to the sumptuous surroundings the works are distinctly lo-fi, naïve paintings of sections of text that recall the decorative panels of canal barges or the signage of traditional fairgrounds and circuses. Aside from this the bold and simplistic palette of colours in which the panels are presented contrasts sharply to the subdued, rich and Gothic colouring of this lavish lounge.

The work derives from an occasion on which Guardian tennis correspondent Steve Bierley switched places with one of the arts correspondents and wrote a review of a Louise Bourgeois' exhibition with no background knowledge Bourgeois or the work. The result was a frank and refreshingly article that differed greatly in style from conventional arts

coverage. Taking this event as a starting point Smith set about transcribing the article onto panels. Much like Bierley coming to an exhibition without prior knowledge, those that should happen upon this whilst visiting the bar could be forgiven for believing the work to be decorative advertising boards, such is their colourful style. There is however more depth here to be discovered when the artistic context becomes apparent, something which is somewhat appropriate when one considers the way that the work deals with relational meanings.

The work takes several important post-modern concerns. It examines the nature of language and representation, semiotics and (quite literally) signs. The work is comprised of elements of text deprived of their original meaning through a process of de-contextualising them and altering their relational structures. This occurs both in the paintings themselves (by fracturing and reassembling the text) and in the process of placing art criticism in an artwork, these 'signs' become signifiers for the article itself, their meanings relational to it. Ultimately the article itself is an interesting exercise in semiotics and structuralism, its potential meanings being multiple depending upon our awareness of its relations to art criticism and tennis coverage.

The work also sets about deconstructing and challenging established hierarchies and notions of expert and professional. The notion of expert artist is questioned through the naïve and folkish style of the paintings' execution and by the fact that the artistic subject matter in fact derives from a non-artist, ie. a tennis journalist. Notions of expert are also questioned in terms of criticism: the work questioning the authority of the critical voice in light of the fresh assessments arrived at by the non-critic. By taking the non-professional criticism and re-presenting it as another non-critic (ie. as an artist) Smith achieves a subversion of the role of artist and critic. This is especially interesting in the light of Smith's words: 'There should be no artists, just people making art, and by the same token there should be no art critics, just people writing about art'. Surrounded by luxurious seating, this is work to rest you feet with if not your brain.

The Enlightenments, Dean Gallery

This large scale, three venue show is the jewel in the crown of the Edinburgh Art Festival this year. Drawing it general them from the city's inherent contrasts. Edinburgh is a city of contrasts: its high culture, its position as a seat of classical refinement, the 'Athens of the North', a place of learning, of natural science and philosophy. Contrast this with its Neogothic fantasy architecture, its darkened alleyways and gloomy catacombs. The show is entitled The Enlightenments (note the integral 's'). This draws upon Edinburgh's Enlightenment (no 's') legacy but for enlightenments to occur there must first be darkness, a darkness that remains, lurking around the peripheries. It is The Enlightenments plural and this is certainly a pluralist show. It refuses to conform to pigeon-holing, it showcases a variety of approaches and does not make any ideological claim to be in possession of all the answers. Intellectual yet visceral, accessible and yet complex it is a truly fresh and inspiring show. This sense of freshness and alternative perspectives derives in large part from its curator Juliana Engberg: a writer, curator and director of Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

At the Talbot Rice, the one time natural history museum where Darwin worked are Joseph Kosuth's neon texts and drawings, literally enlightening their surroundings. Kosuth's work conceptually addresses the theme of the show, its inherent contrasts, as extracts of text from Darwin and Nietzsche play off each other along the corridor. I found the contrast stimulating in the complex relational contexts in which society and the academic canon contextualises the two men. Darwin is repeatedly lionised whilst Nietzsche is frequently demonised and yet the two men's philosophies overlap upon the central crux of survival of the fittest. Nietzsche's Übermensch is an utterly Darwinian concept, indeed in *Thus Spoke*

Zarathustra Zarathustra himself states: 'What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment...' I found this contrast fascinating. Between the text are elements from the sketches in Darwin's notes all picked out in gleaming, icy neon against the cool, grey walls.

In the centre of town the Collective space hosts Susan Norrie's two short films SHOT and Enola. Both are disturbing, strange affairs with an uncanny nightmarish quality that recalls science fiction and creates feelings of alienation and unease. Shot is comprised of imagery from the moon-like landscape of a huge open-cast mine spliced together with footage from a rocket launch. There is nothing overtly sinister but we are left with the subtle impression that we are viewing half-caught glimpses of the dystopian future. Science and progress are presented as cold, alienating forces. Enola, (I'm not sure what the title refers to but Enola happens to spell 'alone' backwards) continues the dystopian ambiance. It takes the form of an intimate letterbox projection, as if we are peering through a small window in onto a miniature world. Here we see an odd, atmospheric and uncanny scene that appears to be some kind of theme park. It evokes the miles of desolation and emptiness that characterise the post-industrial retail parks that fringe suburbia. All around us the room is in darkness and again these contrasts: darkness and light, progress and history, science and art, utopia and dystopia begin to emerge.

The final venue is the Dean Gallery where the imagery of utopia and dystopia again is in evidence. Upon entry you discover a troupe of singers, Gabrielle de Vietri's work Hark, composing and performing songs concerning the days news, we hear a hopeful rendition of a piece on the economic crisis, this is utopia and dystopia all thrown in together. Elsewhere an animated Rousseau and Pascal debate converse in Joshua Mosley's animated piece and Nathan Coley's installation moves and intrigues with its copse kiln-dried, enamelled, tree trunks. The work is both architectural and natural, twee and folkish yet bleak and apocalyptic. Are these trees some piece of minimal design for a cool new apartment or are they the broken remains of a nuclear explosion? Again we are presented with possible competing visions of the future. At the centre of the show is Tacita Dean's hour long film Presentation Sisters, depicting the mundane daily lives of nuns in Cork with lyrical and touching sensitivity and Greg Creek stunning mixed-media drawing that shows us Edinburgh as we've never seen it before, or maybe as we have. The city is presented as a fragmented jumble of narratives, a work in progress, a place of both darkness and light, of contrasts, as a utopia and a dystopia. And through the prism of Edinburgh we can see the world at large both lit up and cast into shadow.

Eva Hesse – Studiowork, The Fruit Market Gallery

There is something poignant about this Eva Hesse exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery. These intimate small scale works are strikingly fragile and minimal and almost get lost in the vast white spaces of the gallery. They are works whose intentional status remains lost to us, Hesse never specified: we are not to know if these are works in progress, experiments, finished works. They were mainly given as gifts or left behind in Hesse's studio upon her death. This incredible contextual instability in the work serves to compound its inherent transience, both intentional and non-intentional. Questions of intentionality are amongst the many asked of us by Curator Briony Fer's delicately understated show.

Transience is a theme that becomes striking when one considers the materials themselves: rope, metal, wood, string, cotton, wire, rubber tubing, fibreglass, plastic and latex. These materials are often inherently transient, whether this was intentional on Hesse's part or not is unclear, it does however underscore the fragility of the works and indeed acquires new meanings in relation to Hesse's biographical background and early death. Because

their state of completion is indeterminate then to assess their state of decay is also problematic. This raises fundamental issues surrounding art, taxonomy and conservation. The transience is so integral to the work that to view them merely as objects is simplistic, perhaps more valuable is to assess them as processes in flux, almost organic in nature.

This ties in neatly to the works' form, often organic and psychologically suggestive. There are readings that could present the pieces within a Freudian context ascribing them status as symptomatic manifestations of psychological processes, again transient, again relational and if viewed as subconscious manifestations then again drawing into question notions of intentionality and the status of art itself. The work certainly offers these connotations: like formal free-associations, anthropomorphic, surreal, recalling Oppenheim or the forms that inhabit Tanguy and yet at once highly formal and aesthetic. Questions of texture, weight, balance and colour are explored, humanity, fragility and decay never stay far from the thoughts as we are invited to examine this delicate work up close and personal.

It is the transience that speaks the loudest to me in this quiet show, the fact that these are fragments, artistic ephemera of a young life ended is almost elegiac. The materials of the work are succumbing, like their creator, to time: changing colour, the latex decaying. This work, whilst timeless in many of its concepts, is far from timeless in its very human physicality. Just before she died of a brain tumour aged 34 Hesse stated 'life doesn't last, art doesn't last, it doesn't matter'. This for me is what I take from the exhibition.

Giuliana Sommantico, Total Kunst

Fascinated by the photographic process, the works of Argentinian photographer Giuliana Sommantico touch upon concerns with process, authorial voice, truth and narrative. Trained as a photojournalist the work demonstrates a journalistic eye. Sommantico then goes on to deconstruct this however, layering and repeating images in a Warhol-esque fashion questioning notions of art vs mass production, art photograph vs journalistic image, subjective authorial voice vs interpretation and the editorial distance of journalistic imagery. Her repetitive iconography explores individualism, notions of truth and the integrity of narrative in a Post-modern context.

James Morrison – New Paintings, The Scottish Gallery

One of Scotland's most highly-regarded landscape painters Morrison's work is at once traditional and fresh. His sparing and fluid brushwork is tightly expressive in an understated way. It is more than a little Romantic and draws upon the long and varied genre of landscape painting that hat-tips to Modernism if not emulating it. This exhibition which encompasses work from the past two years ranges widely across the impressive Scottish landscape.

This is work that sits at the traditional and commercial end of the art spectrum and though accomplished it does not fall into the range of work that is of particular interest to me personally. It is fundamentally a commercial application of creativity, as much as design or copywriting, it commodifies by translating creativity or nature into capital, therefore for me it is a conventional commercial activity (a little like my own landscape photography that I keep essentially separate from my art practice). Until a more sensible terminology is invented to clearly differentiate art along Pre-Modern commodity models and Post-Modern process/conceptual models there will continue to be arguments about what is and what isn't art. I would not seek to say that either form was not art, it is just that they are fundamentally different cultural phenomena. Until more sophisticated terminology catches on I am of the belief that a truce should be called and people enjoy what they enjoy

and enjoy it for what it is.

Joachim Koester – Poison Protocols, Stills

Highly complex and conceptual, the work of Joachim Koester employs strategies of montage and archive. In this, his first UK solo exhibition, Koester is clearly fascinated by the problematic nature narrative and the illusion of objectivity. Fragmenting narratives he uses photography and film to explore marginalised, non-canonical and individualised histories and notions of transgression from over-arching structures. His slightly uncomfortable but poised and dynamic photographs appear to mimic the appearance of decontextualised documentary photographs, relating it would seem to the function of history not merely as a passive record of events but as an active force capable of constructing and creating phenomenological experiences and social relations. Through this process he uses his works to ensure linear narrative breaks down as past and future become reflexive and interdependent. Truth too becomes relational, in constant flux between the known and the imagined. The work deconstructs objective histories still further, examining other systems of deconstructing accepted narratives from mind-altering substances to the occult.

National Gallery of Scotland

The most striking thing that the visitor notes upon setting foot in the National Gallery of Scotland is the distinct central prominence given to the famed pair of Titian's. This is clearly in relation to the recent high profile campaign to save the paintings 'for the nation'. One is struck, aside from the Titian's, by the relatively small size of the rest of the gallery, there are not extensive amounts on display. It is then possible to understand just how important the Titian works are to the National Gallery and indeed to Edinburgh and Scotland as a whole. It is essentially a question of status, Edinburgh's status as a cultured European capital, capable of viewing itself on a par with other European capitals. It of course also goes to the heart of Scotland's status as a nation, let us be clear, despite what may have been said, the nation these were being saved for was Scotland. It was important for political and ergo socio-economic forces in Edinburgh that its status as conveyed through items of treasure (or art as some people refer to it) be maintained. Art has always been employed in this fashion, as a signifier of value and therefore status. This is of course why these works were to be found in an aristocratic collection to begin with. Now I would argue that value is never an inherent property of objects but is a relational judgement assigned to them through social consensus as such these Titian's have no inherent economic value. I would also argue that these works have no inherent artistic value, there is no unique factor that marks these apart from other works in the same genre, other renaissance figurative paintings, indeed Titian is well know for employing assistants to carry out much of the technical brushwork for him, so clearly then the artistic value is not technical. Neither is it conceptual, again there is no distinction conceptually between these pieces and other similar works of the genre. Clearly they have some value as historical artefacts but again no more so than other objects that tell us something about Renaissance Venice. Neither is their value educational, other than in purely historical terms, Tracy Emin was prominent in arguing for the taxpayer to fund the acquisition of the works (perhaps in an effort to maintain the perception of value in art more generally) however what does her practice owe to these works? did they teach her to draw naked ladies? Clearly a life-model, or more likely a mirror would suffice. I would argue then that in Art educational terms they are insignificant. We are left with their value lying squarely in their position as status conferring commodities. It is in the vested interests of the property owning classes and certain artists to maintain a consensus of high value upon certain difficult to acquire art objects, it is a system of maintaining their social position and power.

Whilst they clearly therefore have a symbolic value to Edinburgh and Scotland I would argue that their status goes to the heart of the very existence of museums and national institutions such as the National Gallery of Scotland. The first public museum was the Muséum Français on Aug 10th 1793 to coincide with the festival of national unity. It existed to propagate the idea of a homogeneous French state, something that has never truly existed (consider Brittany, the Basque country etc.) but that is deeply ingrained in the centralising anti-pluralist tendencies of French politics to this day. Ever since that moment museums have existed largely as repositories of canonical knowledge, of imperial and nationalist spectacle and of power relations. They purport to present a space of universal values detached from moral, social and political variables, this is of course nonsense as is their presented hegemony of narrative.

I would argue that it is time for a new model of museum, a Post-modern museum that does not view its role as improvement and transmission of a Liberal Humanist canon, rather instead it offers engagement, it is of the people not for the people. They should become pluralist, investigative and offer alternative readings, they should juxtapose the treasures of empire with the clear acknowledgement of their implications. For this reason I believe there is no justification for the amount of money spent upon retaining the Titian works. The money would be better placed reforming the gallery and redistributed in the style of Roosevelt's new deal to grassroots art across the nation that can truly engage and make an impact on peoples lives. The money would be better spent on innovative, new, engaged practice. Let the Titians follow the money to American and become someone else's status symbol, art should be more than that or has Post-modernism taught us nothing.

Nigel Peake – Making Ends Meet, Schop

Nigel Peake's endearing show takes over Schop for their first crack at the Edinburgh Arts Festival. Schop is the new gallery initiative from Oliver Chapman architects, which aims to show work from artists who deal with architecture or address the built environment in some form.

Peake employs drawing and print in order to create idiosyncratic images of imagined sheds. The works employ a neat, sparse and naïve style that places them firmly within the context of much contemporary illustration and contains discernible traces of Outsider Art. The repetitive images of myriad sheds reference ideas of archive, arrangement and collecting, seemingly fascinated by the tiny, easily overlooked differences that mark out each shed different and give it character. Yet along with this the sheds retain a remarkable uniformity as they queue up in ranks of near identical images hinting at an exploration of ideas of mass production and bespoke, individualist creation. It is work that is charming and interesting, exploring notions of difference and similarity along with a sheer enjoyment in the variety of form that can be conjured up from a handful of simple variables.

Our Magnolia, Doggerfisher (Rosalind Nashashibi & Lucy Skaer)

Our Magnolia was always going to be a piece that would draw me in, I must declare an interest. Paul Nash is one of my all time favourite painters and this work by Beck's Futures-winning artist Rosalind Nashashibi and Turner Prize nominee Lucy Skaer, takes its starting point from Nash's work, the 1944 painting *Flight of the Magnolia*.

Nash's painting flickers to life in front of us from out of the fuzzy grain of the dancing film. This sensual image presents us with a muted, blooming flower, soft and smooth as ice-

cream, its petals a mellow, fleecy peach tone emerging surreal from a milky pinkish sky. The diffuse, archaic aesthetic of the 16mm film blends lyrically with Nash's subtle, subdued colouring. It brings to our attention the fact that we are looking at a painting through another medium, through film, and begins to open up questions of semiotics, of meaning and perception. This effect is compounded as the camera zooms, isolating and interrogating a section of the painting, decontextualising it and altering its relational narrative. The painting represents a similar ambiguity of signs: it was painted in response to the sight of enemy parachutes blossoming across the sky like flowers during the war and explores this idea of beauty and terror both signified in the same sign, entirely reliant on context for their interpretation. The film plays with this idea of ambiguity and the relationship of beauty and fear.

We leave the painting and instead are presented with muted, pastel footage of a whale carcass, beautifully shot in soft light, partially buried in a pale sand. We are drawn into the deep shadow of its empty eye sockets. A photograph of Margaret Thatcher is picked over forensically by the camera, her eyes again dark with make-up, her face an ambiguous sign, iconic to viewers but meaning quite different things depending upon their political allegiance. Perhaps the artists are seeking to cleanse this particular iconic sign of its associations, just as Nash allayed his fear by painting the blooming enemy parachutes.

Next we see images of an airliner on a runway that appears as if it is taken from the amateur footage of some citizen journalist, potentially threatening some connotations of hijack or disaster, loaded with the airborne fear in Nash's painting. The digital date and time display runs in the corner, seemingly at odds with the 16mm film format, again like the act of filming the painting, opening up ideas of representation and interpretation.

We see a man staring at a computer and a woman in a museum shrieking. The footage comes from the looting of Iraq's Baghdad Museum during the 2003 invasion and the fear contained in the woman's outburst and the museum location echoes the emerging themes of art, beauty, fear and ambiguity in the work. The painting returns, scratched and distorted until it is submerged in layers of lush distortion. This is a beautiful and fearful piece, quietly moving and visually stunning. There is an inescapable melancholy, a lyrical and understated beauty that haunts the viewer for a long time afterwards.

Paul Nougé – Subversion of the Images, Institut Français d'Écosse

Drawn from the collections of the Archives and Literature Museum of Belgium this collection of nineteen photographs by Paul Nougé makes a fascinating and intriguing exhibition. Nougé (1895 -1967) was a Belgian poet, instigator and theorist of the Surrealist movement in Belgium. This collection of photographs, taken by Nougé around the turn of 1930 and published in 1968 under the title *Subversion of the images* are startling relics of Surrealism in its heyday.

Reminiscent of much of Breton's own visual output and bringing to mind such photographic greats as Bill Brandt it is hard to believe Nougé was not trained as a visual artist. The photographs brilliantly carry the uncanny and dreamlike aesthetic so characteristic of Surrealism along with its equal fascination with meaning and semiotics. The works wonderfully problematise relational structures of words and imagery, deconstructing concepts of meaning in the fashion of Magritte. Nougé's poetic background is remarkably apparent in this respect and in the richness and suggestive nature of his imagery with the label visual poetry seeming a particularly apt one for this fantastic selection of images. I very much enjoyed this small exhibition and felt that I had also learned something about a character in the Surrealist movement about whom I had erstwhile know relatively little.

Peter Blake – Venice, Edinburgh Printmakers (Peter Blake)

Acclaimed Edinburgh Printmakers is the venue for British artist Peter Blake's *The Venice Suite* which has toured here from London.

The works take the form of Classic Pop Art, drawing upon the anarchic collages of Dada and repackaging them for a commercial audience au fait with the visual language of consumerism and mass production. Blake's Venice images return slightly towards the Dadaist roots of this genre of image-making yet transform it from an individual act of creative arrangement, through the medium of screenprint into a classically 'mass'-produced item. Whilst the technique is anarchic, these works do not share Dada's political or philosophical visions, instead, like much contemporary art, they are enamoured with opulence and glamour. They are delightfully surreal, self-consciously archaic and yet very much of the moment. They are colourful, atmospheric and fantastical creating potential narratives and new meanings from the decontextualised scraps of former ones. Signs and signifiers are amassed and put to work in new contexts to deconstruct ideas of media, authenticity, meaning, artistic creation and intention. The assembled fragments, derived from postcards, photographs and books. There are scraps from the old masters juxtaposed with children's illustrations and placed in the context of the Biennale space (Blake created the works in response to his 2007 visit to the event). The effect is a rather timid challenge to the conventional hierarchies of image-making deeply ingrained in the Western Tradition. This is not revolutionary, in fact far from it, this is a carefully orchestrated commercial exercise, the works are non-threatening and populist and along with this exhibition being part of a tour Blake plans to extend the project into a major world tour of the planet's iconic cities, no doubt with huge commercial potential.

Power Plant, Royal Botanic Gardens, ((Mark Anderson, Anne Bean, Jony Easterby, Kirsten Reynolds, Ulf Pedersen, Christine Leboutte)

(copy of review given above under performance section)

Something of the primeval jungle haunts this piece. No doubt the jungle at night was a place to be very wary of for our ancient ancestors and I don't doubt that this has manifested itself somewhere in our collective unconscious, providing experiences such as this with much of their uncanny power. This was *Day of the Triffids*, this was being lost deep in a fairytale forest at midnight, this was Wonderland come to the city. All of the magical, astonishing things that you supposed as a child went on after dark in the distant woods are presented for you here in a powerful, intimately secretive and yet spectacularly overpowering way. The surreal and uneasy situation of the glass house at night, the thick warmth, the heady smell, the muffled sounds and heavy darkness that looms and closes from all sides is powerful, its anthropomorphic and exotic plants enveloping you as you nervously creep through their midst. This is a powerful and moving environment, brought magically to life with surreal and wondrous interventions of light.

Mark Anderson, Anne Bean, Jony Eastserby, Ulf Mark Pedersen and Kirsten Reynolds combine light and sound to compliment and transform this enchanted wonderland into a constantly unfolding labyrinth of marvels. Glitter balls in the trees cast fluttering fairy-like gleams across the canopy, flames leap and dance in a symphony of low moans and cries, neon hums and sings, projections cast kaleidoscopic snail forms into the black. There is a true surreal magic, something otherworldly and alien about this place that makes you feel that you've stepped onto another planet. You could get lost in this place for hours, the dramatic colour-tinged stream split with staves of light as you wander, aimless, like the

star of your own film: fractured, dream-like narratives playing and tumbling through you head. Awesome, magical and uncanny, it makes us feel like children again, overcome with wonder. A stunning piece of work.

Reveal/Reset, New Media Scotland

Conceived with the avant garde philosophy of developing creative applications to challenge the still fresh conventions of networked and web-based art, the Alt-W Fund has commissioned nine Scottish-based artists to create new work here. Reveal/Reset is a group show that presents the resulting innovative creations to dazzle us with their consummate and complex technical skill.

The work often appears cold, detached and remote, its networks are of the digital kind, there seems little place for the audience here. This seemingly contrived alienation seems a little at odds with the professed aim of challenging the conventions of web-based and digital art which indeed has often seemed remote and mechanistic and engaging beyond the screen.

Projects include *Aeolia* from Sarah Kettley which comprises a series of woven items designed for the body and that utilise prototype stretch sensors. There is also Ben Dembroski's open source code piece and FOUND Electronic's *Cybraphon* which is a performing robot that tempers its performance in response to activity on certain internet sites. ~ In the Fields' *Floc:Skein* is a sizable globe that glows with a strange light, appearing to contain fluttering flocks of birds with interactive poetic fragments of text playing across its surface.

These works are intriguing and indeed ultimately engaging if you can overcome the technical remoteness and slightly alienating mechanisms on display.

Rewind at Stills, Stills

Replaying important pieces from the early years of British video art *REWIND at Stills* originates from a research project at the University of Dundee and displays digitally remastered ground-breaking works from the 70s and 80s. This fascinating exhibition revisits the formative era of a medium that has subsequently gone on to become firmly part of the contemporary art canon.

Aside from the physical display at Stills the exhibition continues online with archives of information on the artists such as interviews and critical appraisals.

Works such as David Hall's 1971 *TV Interruptions* demonstrate just how important these pieces have been in shaping the contemporary artworld as we know it today and in tackling such important questions as narrative, media hierarchies and authorial integrity.

Roger Ackling, Sleeper

This tiny show lurks magically deep in the basement of an architects practice out in the heart of a residential district. It feels like a challenge to find with makes its tiny scale all the more intriguing. It is perhaps a little ironic that in a work that viscerally depended upon the sun as its prime component that it should be hidden, far from natural light, down in a basement. Personally I think it adds to the effect. If the desired purpose of the works was to visualise the actions of fundamental forces such as light and time then I feel that

decontextualising them in this bunker-like setting allows us to conversely focus more intently upon them.

The installations themselves are starkly simple, comprising scraps of discarded wood and card, very matter-of-fact found objects, ephemera in a sense. Ackling then employs a magnifying glass to focus light in an intense and laborious process to mark the wood with an extremely minimal pattern, in this case a zigzagging line. Much like his friends and contemporaries Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, Ackling's practice is essentially process based, the installations are merely a manifestation, a method of giving physicality to a transient process. Contemporary art owes these pioneering practitioners a great deal and this show reminds us that aesthetics, process and concept can be married into compelling and effective pieces of artwork.

These works are sparse and minimal, intense and thoughtful, each contains a weight of time and labour frozen within its single line, the string that links it to the wall inviting us to consider the unseen elements that went into each piece, the time and process that goes before and after each, emphasising that each is simply a snapshot, a moment in time. The work has a considered power and gravitas in the way it takes objects that from the tiny, unnoticed margins of existence and uses them to speak of things much bigger than itself, of natural forces, our relation to them, of the temporal, of our own mortality and existential responsibilities.

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art

A large proportion of this gallery is given over to Damien Hirst, a man of whom Saatchi once said:

General art books dated 2105 will be ... brutal ... Every artist other than Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, Donald Judd and Damien Hirst will be a footnote

but then he would say that, he still owns much of Hirst's work and the reputation of his critical judgement is as much tied to Hirst's fate as Hirst's fate is tied to his judgement. I was intrigued by the prospect of seeing so many works in one place however, I have only ever seen two of Hirst's pieces before and was interested to see more 'in the flesh' so to speak. I wanted to know if there was more to the man than audacity, bullying and self-publicity.

To my slight surprise I enjoyed the work more than I had anticipated, I'd never been a massive fan of his but actually engaging with the work on a personal level I found the concepts interesting and provocative along with much of the imagery startling. It was clearly conceived of in the mind of someone with a strong sense of the iconic. A lot of the subject matter is blunt and obvious: religious imagery, death, drugs, it was the wider theoretical questions raised by the work however that I found interesting. It is the ideas of iconic signifiers, authenticity, the nature of art along with the interplay of power structures and the media that I find most interesting. Whether this is in fact Hirst's intention for the work is indeed debatable but essentially his intentions are irrelevant as this is what I get from the work and I feel that much of it is an important comment upon contemporary culture. I notice that his star appears to be on the wane and even Saatchi recently described him as 'off-form'. Perhaps if he was to go out of fashion for a while it might be no bad thing and we might be able to arrive at more of a balanced assessment of the true value of his work. After all anyone whom the Daily Mail claims threatens 'to make barbarians of us all' can't be all bad.

The Signspotting Project, Princes Mall Shopping Centre

Inspired by such attention-grabbing, mass-art spectacles as *CowParade* and *Earth from Above*, *The Signspotting Project* was first displayed in Stockholm in 2008 followed by Copenhagen this year. Its trip to Edinburgh to coincide with the Fringe is its first UK appearance and is split between the interior and roof of the Princes Mall shopping centre. This is less art and more a bit of fun, its the kind of material more often found on the pages of *Nuts*, no that's unfair, possibly *Viz* and less frequently at an arts festival. To be fair, even its creator admits 'I'm not saying you have to come into Edinburgh just to see this but if you're anywhere nearby, it's certainly worth ten minutes to check it out'. This is just a little light entertainment really and there is no harm in that, I just wonder how it managed to take up such a lot of space on the art review pages of most of the publications around here.

Suitcase Series, Total Kunst

A remote exhibition of offerings sent in from around the globe, this is collaboration, this is the personal and the general, this is the influence of web 2.0 culture, the desire to expose our lives, to be memorialised. Think of these suitcases as memory boxes, time capsules or even physical facebook pages if you prefer. Although that is perhaps a little unfair, these are not just exercises in narcissism, they attempt to express something about where they come from, about their culture about their existential reality. This is a neat little exploration of globalisation, the spirit of cultural exploration and pluralism. This is multiple narratives. This is a fascinating show.

The How Not to Cookbook, Collective (Aleksandra Mir)

Pushing the boundaries of installation, this exhibition is essentially a room full of copies of Aleksandra Mir's book. The book is the artwork as much as the installation, the installation is really just a monument to the book. Then again process of creating the book is as much the artwork as the book itself, indeed the book is essentially just a monument to the process. It lies at the heart of issues surrounding process based work and the problematic nature of recording it.

Visual artist has created this book, subverting the genre of the cookbook into a form of anti-cookbook entitled *The How Not to Cookbook: Lessons Learned the Hard Way* for the Edinburgh Art Festival. The book comprises a huge amassed collection of anecdotal hints and tips that stem from contributors' culinary disasters. It contains the contributions of one thousand people from across the globe. There are mishaps of every form imaginable in here from the humorous, the confessional, the philosophical to the truly insightful. Laid out with an eye for design the contributions are arranged into thematic sections that range from 'Explosions' to 'Pets' and explore many dimensions of human nature from our cultural assumptions to our personal psychological quirks.

Allegedly inspired by the communal nature of cooking and the human capability to learn through processes of trial and error Mir was moved to explore the concept of error and the acknowledgement of error as the basis for the work. In my view the work, like much contemporary engaged practice, makes use of the cultural phenomenon of UGC or User Generated Content. This is reality television in book form, this is the formalisation, the placement in in a curated and traditional format, of exactly the kind of thing found in forums all over the web. It is a wiki-cookbook, only slightly inverted, this is how *not* to do it. The wiki concept is only slightly inverted however because through establishing how not to do something we frequently learn how to do it correctly. Through its examination of such subject matter then the work naturally touches upon issues of artistic authorship, the nature of art and of narrative, the disruption of conventional relational systems and

meanings, the relationship between individual and communal narratives and the deconstruction of established hierarchies. This is a cookbook for the Postmodern era.

We Love Lomo, Beyond Words

Beyond Words hosts this showcase of images by leading photographers as well as images arrived at through open submission all shot using Lomo cameras. It is an interesting curatorial position to juxtapose the professional and amateur in this fashion but it is innovative and welcome, a commendably democratic approach to selection that is fittingly appropriate for a show depicting the great levelling effect of the Lomo. There are no heaps of expensive equipment and digital post-processing to hide behind with this one, just the photographer, the camera, their creativity and selective eye. Amateur and professional stand shoulder to shoulder here, shoot hip to hip. It is the nature of film with its processing expenses and its limited number of exposures that it forces a more selective, discerning approach upon its user, this seems to be philosophy of the curator of this show. They could have gone for the scattergun, digital style multiple-exposure approach but instead, like a roll of film, they have gone for the more discerning, selective approach to the photographs on display.

We Love Lomo is a fittingly loving tribute to 'Lomography': the lo-fi and retro aesthetic that is still influential and much loved today as ever, only now that love has been swollen with nostalgia for the charms of film. Depending on your viewpoint Lomo is either a low-tech photographic mindset or a piece of cynical marketing genius that has nevertheless had a discernible influence on design and art, this influence and its unique aesthetic effects are celebrated here in this exhibition in a number of images that are intriguing, often timeless and dreamlike, that consistently refuse to be pinned down. The distinctive square framing, the peripheral deterioration and the idiosyncratic focal range gives the images a certain 'feel' that sets them apart from much other photography.

Digital photography is fantastic, it has myriad advantages: it is cheaper and therefore more democratic, it is convenient: with smaller cameras and larger memories, not to mention instant review capability, it is far harder to miss a shot or photo opportunity. However there is a certain something that has been lost with the demise of film. This year tragically sees the final Polaroid films go out of date and that is the loss of a unique and beautiful aesthetic that can not be replaced. The very convenience of digital has undermined the creative act in so much as it has undermined the selective approach to image making. And at the risk of sounding nostalgic and sentimental, there is a beauty to film that digital just doesn't possess: the anticipation, the thrill of the unpredictable, the unexpected, the value of considering and the value of waiting for something. Like this exhibition it may require patience but the results can be almost literally magic.

After this exhibition I must confess that I bought a Lomo camera myself. I'm no novice when it comes to photographic knowledge and I can spot a marketing campaign when I see one. I know this is a cheap, plastic camera dressed up as an alternative mindset, championing the amateur and the creativity of chance. I know it's overpriced, I know all of this, but I still bought one. Either the marketing still worked or else there just is something special and indefinable about the images off this thing that you just can't help but fall for. We love Lomo? Well marketing campaign or not, I do anyway.