

# Touching what's special in the everyday

News

Artists' story: FrenchMottershead



FrenchMottershead, *A Daily Ritual to Capture the Presence of Everybody*, Saturday 11 February 2006, photograph from performance for camera, National Review of Live Art, Glasgow. Courtesy: the artists. Photo: Neilson Photography

In the early stages of our collaboration, which began in 1999, we – Rebecca French and Andrew Mottershead – came to the realisation that we wanted to invite the 'audience' to engage complicitly in the creative act.

We make live work that specifically explores ideas of human identity, physicality, interaction, social ritual and the everyday public and private realms in which they are played out.

In time we've developed a flexible format that we call 'microperformance'. Often, we are physically absent from the work and use objects, instructions, maps, photographs and actions to gently subvert sites and the way contemporary art is produced. Though the outcomes vary in response to the context, each work is dependent upon the actions of its participants for its meaning.

We've often sought to document our work through participants' experiential feedback. By actively encouraging the receipt of written records –

critical, constructive or complementary – we enable a quality of documentation that is often illuminating and impossible to capture by camera.

An example we'd like to offer is Mary Brennan's reflection on some of our recent works made as Artists-in-Residence at the 2006 National Review of Live Art (NRLA), beginning with the excerpt below and leading to the full text available online. Our intention was to create new works that facilitated creative exchange between audience, artists and the locality, which engaged all visitors to the NRLA as microperformers.

*'Was that the announcement?' The chatter in the bar suddenly gains a single focus. Crumpled bits of paper, bearing details of the day's activities, are hauled out of handbags and pockets. Watches are hastily checked – hey, look! People are rushing out of just-finishing performances and they're flocking towards the Tramway's main rise of stairs. It must be, it is – time for the Daily Ritual.*

*And suddenly, we all seem to be kids again. Jostling and grinning, searching out the ideal vantage point, waiting for the moment when we too, will become a captured moment in the cavalcade of the 2006 National Review of Live Art at Tramway, Glasgow.*

*When FrenchMottershead – artists-in-residence at NRLA 2006 – listed a daily group photograph as part of their contribution to the five-day event, no one could have predicted the way their Daily Ritual to Capture the Presence of Everybody would become such a magical, magnetic highpoint in each day's programme...*

For full text visit [www.frenchmottershead.com/touching.html](http://www.frenchmottershead.com/touching.html)  
Upcoming FrenchMottershead shows include 'Club Class' at Tate Modern, Tate Liverpool and the ICA, and 'Shops' at the Liverpool Biennial and the Tract Festival, Penzance. FrenchMottershead are current Thinkers in Residence at the Live Art Development Agency.

See Subscriber prize on page 30 for a chance to win a bespoke t-shirt by FrenchMottershead.

**Touching what's special in the everyday - a reflection on recent work by FrenchMottershead**  
(Mary Brennan, May 2006)

'Was that the bell?' The chatter in the bar suddenly gains a single focus. Crumpled bits of paper are hauled out of handbags and pockets, watches are checked - hey, look! People are rushing out of just-finishing performances and they're flocking towards the Tramway's main rise of stairs. It must be, it is - time for the Daily Ritual.

And suddenly, we all seem to be kids again. Jostling and grinning, searching out the ideal vantage point, waiting for the moment when we too, will become a captured moment in the cavalcade of the 2006 National Review of Live Art at Tramway, Glasgow.

When FrenchMottershead - artists-in-residence at NRLA 2006 - listed a daily group photograph as part of their contribution to the five-day event, no-one could have predicted the way their Daily Ritual would become such a magical, magnetic highpoint in each day's programme. Even the most blasé ticket-holder - performer or audience member alike - found themselves drawn to the fold. A voice would rally us through a megaphone: 'if you can see the camera, the camera can see you!' And necks would crane, or eyes swivel in pursuit of the local photographer and his daily-different perch. 'Now - look your best!' A split second...Snap - over and done with. And everyone would drift away, like a spent sigh.

Sometime during the next day, a vast colour print of upturned faces would appear in an upstairs corridor and a constant stream of folk would turn away from their pre-planned routes to NRLA's installations, live performances or video screenings, to pause and scan the image. Girlies would giggle - 'you blinked!' The dude who insisted on pulling faces or striking strange poses would smirk contentedly to himself. Others would fail to recognise themselves - 'God! do I really look like that?' But then, the gaze would start to skip about in search of friends, or maybe the fanciable stranger who squeezed close in innocent intimacy. As the week wore on, this photo-gallery marked the NRLA's brief constituency: you can see how some faces prove constant throughout, others come and go, the crowd varies in size as the attendance peaks over the weekend. It becomes an archive of sorts - but, like so much of what FrenchMottershead achieve, it's primarily a delicious subversion of performative norms and a celebration of something we frequently overlook: the surprising, 'special' element that nestles within our everyday existence.

You might think, what with video-phones and compact cam-recorders, disposable cameras (and even CCTV!) that there would be no mystique left about having a photograph taken. The clue as to why FrenchMottershead's gambit hooked us in our hundreds lies in the title: A Daily Ritual. They made us, the audience, a part of the programme. Validated and reinforced our presence at NRLA by beckoning us to join in. Reversed our role from passive to active and made us the performers. Their thinking, here, is the stuff of really intriguing theses and brow-furrowing discussions on the nature of artistic protocols and 'knowing your place' in the 'watcher-watched' conundrum. But even the finest, most exhaustive academic analyses can't quite encompass the joyous juice of what FrenchMottershead wrought at NRLA 2006. They created a sense of spontaneous community, and with their Daily Ritual engendered the kind of buoyant camaraderie that we wistfully, tenderly, associate with 'Good Times'.

The family wedding, where old feuds are put on hold while the photographer demands our cheesiest grins. School trips to run-down seaside resorts, where the class joker pokes a tongue out at the lens and secret sweethearts smile at each other, not the camera. The office leaving-party. The 18 - 30 holiday where it didn't matter if the sun had turned skin the colour of fried spam - you were with your mates and it was the best of all possible worlds. Contexts where a sense of belonging - while knowing that the group will inevitably fragment - seems to turn up the volume and the brightness on being alive.

At Tramway, hordes eagerly locked into FrenchMottershead's ritual of belonging. They looked forward to gathering. Got steadily bolder in how they chose to present themselves to the viewfinder.

Started cheerily chanting the daily slogan, 'if you can see the camera...' in anticipation of the final count-down. In the midst of one of the world's most noteworthy showcases of live art, the onlookers turned themselves into a work of art without a second thought. (A lot of thought had, of course, gone into the whole set up - but FrenchMottershead major in geniality, so no-one noticed this!)

I've met people since who spent hours at NRLA 2006, but somehow missed out on being in the picture. And regret it. Wished they'd been there. Belonging. Maybe more than that - asserting their existence, imprinting their presence for posterity.

No matter how you come at it, something special has clearly been unlocked in this process. A commonplace action has been transformed into heightened reality. 'Look your best!' On cue, we promptly switch from the automatic pilot that governs so many of our behaviour patterns and instead we inhabit a wonderful blip of immediacy. We re-engage our senses, we fall in love with being alive again - maybe we put adult wisdom on hold and, like children, enjoy the silly fun of posing for a happy snap.

You really had to be there to savour the heady glee of it all - but then, that's the essence of memory... and it's what makes it particular and precious and non-transferable. The photographs remain as triggers, but the experience - the statement of being there, joining in - is privately cached, adding textures to the personal jigsaw of associations that help define us. Previous NRLA's have found FrenchMottershead, in affable prankster-mode, enticing audience members to re-define themselves, if only for the duration of one task. Cards have been handed out, with secret instructions on them - engage the person queuing next to you in a specific conversation about work, was one strand. Place yourself (silently) in a certain playful/saucy/odd kind of proximity to an (unsuspecting) person was another. It's such a piquant thought, really. People milling about, thinking that the only available performances were those listed on the NRLA programme, meanwhile countless incognito-performances are taking place all around them.

That old riddle springs to mind - 'When is a door not a door? When it's ajar!' But even as notions of what constitutes/legitimises or defines a performance begin to spiral towards infinity, another aspect of these FrenchMottershead projects nips into view. It's to do with permissions, and embracing risk.

When FrenchMottershead hand out their clever cards, they allow us to dodge away from our usual selves. When they wheedle us into the Daily Ritual, they allow us to be the centre of attraction - not a role audiences usually play. The risk is tied into how self-conscious we are: it's a 'lose it, to gain' scenario. Plunge into the game wholeheartedly - jettisoning any fears of looking foolish - and chances are, you gain a refreshed sense of self. It's that free-fall childhood thing again. Playing unself-consciously as an exploration of your own possibilities and preferences, playing to discover yourself and the lie of the land around you.

Which brings us back, to NRLA 2006 and The Map. Entitled Local Review of Necessary Amenities (LRNA) this was a blissful mix of whimsy and practicality - very FrenchMottershead. Each day's NRLA diary had this handy guide on the back: a schematic diagram of how to find useful places - a cash machine, a bookmakers, a pawnbrokers, a pharmacy - all within a five minute walk from Tramway. Strangers in town weren't altogether sure if the information was on the level - the suggestion that you could 'Pass the Time' by strolling to a local petshop to 'Admire Corky in the Window' smacked of being led up the garden path. But trusting souls soon found that the LRNA was spot on, and more fun to follow than your average guidebook. Those who already knew the area were probably even more impressed and beguiled. For the LRNA put a different, jocular shine on a familiar, well-worn terrain. It took the sensible routes - all accurately drawn with street names, directions and which-way turns - and added the local colour that turns a trudge into an adventure, gives everyday shopping for tedious essentials a light-hearted spin.

Did the shops themselves change into magic grottos? No. Were the streets of Southside Glasgow suddenly paved with gold? No. Did scurrying out into a chill February afternoon, in pursuit of a newspaper or aspirin or lung-fuls of fresh air, seem like sharing in a wee NRLA/LRNA joke? Yes, actually. The paper tucked in the pocket, or the handbag, was a smiley, special map - with all roads leading back to Tramway where, thanks to FrenchMottershead, we had all become photo-sensitive to how extra-ordinary, ordinary things can be... if you re-focus, filter in some fun and remember to 'look your best'.

**Mary Brennan** (Glasgow Herald dance/performance critic)

May 2006