

# Scenes of bodily mutilation and female exploitation are among the provocative displays at Gateshead's new live art festival. By Mary Brennan

**L**AST Thursday's noon-day sun is making the arching whiteness of Gateshead's Millennium Bridge positively dazzle.

"It was quite a performance, getting it in there," says my taxi driver, launching into a proud tale of gigantic floating cranes and feats of engineering. Over the next four days, that bridge will become a gateway to a host of live art performances - all connected to a theme of mapping, travelling and exploring/exploding the notion of boundaries - that have been gathered together under the umbrella title of *Navigate*.

Some will inhabit, and briefly reconfigure, airy spaces in the Baltic, the derelict flour mill on the south bank of the Tyne that now houses one of the UK's most dynamic centres for contemporary art. Other performances will be discovered in the dark, under-deck nooks of the *ms Stubnitz*, a German fishing vessel that now sails under the flag of a floating arts venue. It has moored across the river from the Baltic, its steep, shoogly gangplank and narrow Escher-like stairways a wry lesson in navigation skills. A late night coach will transport captive audiences round Newcastle and its surrounding areas in the twilight, offering glimpses of suburbs and sink estates, industrial wastelands and resolutely gentrified enclaves - but with a soundscore that doesn't necessarily locate, but rather dislocates our attempts at "fixing" the where, what and why of the unfamiliar places we drive through.

By Sunday night, when the doors

finally closed on *Navigate*, one underlying ambition of this festival had been achieved: even if weary bodies were stilled and slumping, minds were wandering in all directions. There was the lava-flow of scorching unease generated by Karen Finley of the US, in her monologue-collage of opposing attitudes towards the recent fate of American Terry Schiavo. The way Schiavo - whose persistent vegetative, voiceless state meant others assumed life-or-death decision-making "in her best interests" - was fought over and claimed, often by self-referencing strangers, was a wake-up call and a reminder we are all vulnerable to invasion. Finley is an astutely subversive author who uses words like heat-seeking missiles. She leaves you in no doubt about how frequently our bodies, our minds or our emotions become unwitting



**KIRA O'REILLY ALLOWED SMALL GROUPS TO APPROACH HER BODY AND CUT HER WITH A SCALPEL**

battlegrounds - a site for daily conflicts, not necessarily our own.

Kira O'Reilly, continuing her practice of using her own body as a specific site, allowed small groups to approach, scrutinise a small square of her body and then choose whether to mark (ie cut) her with a scalpel. Stretched out on a table, totally covered by red cloths except for an "operating window" of flesh, O'Reilly embodied a profound range of possibilities and challenges. Why would we choose to cut? Some clearly did, the bloodied nicks and slices being proof. Is it curiosity or an assumption that the (faceless, but noticeably breathing) artist was "asking for it"? Someone offered me "his cut". Did he really have one to give away? O'Reilly's own journey into body work forces onlookers to engage with personal territory they might not otherwise explore.

Lone Twin had, as part of *Navigate*'s commissioning programme, been adventuring aboard the *Stubnitz* before tying up on the Tyne. Gary Winters and Gregg Whelan had sailed from Rotterdam to Newcastle, a three-day passage that produced a whimsical journal of video footage, little tunes, sudden dancey moments and a text that melded Moby Dick with King Lear and quirky asides on the value of snacks, DVDs of popular music and "getting away from it all". Therein lurks the philosophical sting in the Lone Twin tale called Channel 6. What seems like an ad hoc, hasty rummage through their scribbled notebooks and snatches of film emerges as a genuinely wistful,

**OPPRESSION: Andre Stitt's work examines how we shut out our "enemies". Right, the Stubnitz arrives under the Millennium Bridge. Main picture: Phil Babot**

elegiac salute to the dreams that tease and elude us. The lure of journeying, the wish to be somewhere - or someone - else. Nowadays, their on-stage rapport - almost like a couple of hapless vaudevillians who've stumbled into real-time tragedy - charms audiences into fits of laughter. Actually, it's a brilliantly mapped piece of recognisable sadnesses.

**THROUGHOUT THE FOUR DAYS, IN A** wide, white gallery space, Andre Stitt hammered out wrenching, visceral scenarios that played against the solid fabric of a specially constructed wall. This *Navigate* commission, entitled *Nostalgia*, was an epic jigsaw of how we barricade ourselves and our fears in, while trying to shut out, or shut up, the "enemy". Stitt physically punches holes in all the defensive/aggressive arguments. He carves windows and then doors in the plasterboard. He tars and feathers the apertures - hints of dirty protests in the sickly-sweet brown molasses he uses. He shackles himself with a tin mug, a symbol of wartime evacuees, refugees or prisoners (political and otherwise) in boot camps. He clatters and circles, like a caged animal, through different daily rituals plangent with a sense of oppression, abuse and genocide. Enamel mugs and plates



pile up like concentration camp corpses. A child's vest and pants are dunked brown in molasses, then butcher-hooked like a trophy on the wall. In time, there are dozens of these dangling, emblematically stained "shadows" of departed children. The decaying smell becomes more miasmic as Stitt adds in more and more significant details.

Poetic text which made the wall a monument to ideals, suffering and defiance - with a thread of national identity under threat - is painted out in a final wash of dull red. Each encounter with Stitt's pungent commentary opened up new approaches to other pieces on the programme. Melati Suryodarmo's

poignant gyrations on a butter-greasy dance-floor, high-heels skittering and her body flailing, crashing heavily downwards, didn't just parade issues of female exploitation and degradation - chaps laughed, women didn't - but seemed to carry forth some of Stitt's concerns about the dismissive, humiliating attitudes of Western culture towards races and traditions that are foreign, alien and probably suspect.

*Navigate*'s four days - the first major event staged by the Baltic and its associates - opened up many more channels of enquiry than I've charted. More such far-reaching voyages, anchored on the banks the Tyne, are definitely required