If we were to write a ‘review’ of our experience of *Into the Mountain* what parameters would delineate the beginning and end of the event, the performance, our experience? We are not writing a review, but the question still stands. On 23 March 2019 we reserve 3 tickets on the ‘Short route’ for Friday 31 May. On 15 July we submit this essay to Chris Fremantle for publication on the eco/art/scot/land online journal. Between these dates we prepare for and speculate about the event; drive between Glasgow and Kincraig in the Cairngorms (there and back in one day); participate in the walk and the performance in Glen Feshie; engage in various conversations between ourselves and others (face to face in Glasgow and Devon and by Skype); and collectively construct (and re-construct) this essay. We mark these staging posts because for us the total experience of *Into the Mountain* lasts – with differing degrees of intensity and focus - for 105 days between 23 March and 15 July. The thing itself – the walk up Glen Feshie and the performance – is but one part of the ‘eventness’ of the whole experience. The preparation, the thinking, the doing, the reflection and the writing is ‘the event’.

And amongst our speculation around beginnings and ends should we also be wondering about this in terms of our investment/participation?
Into the Mountain is, in fact, umbrella signage for a set of projects (walks, performances, laboratories, conversations, workshops, seminars and training events) imagined, planned and animated by choreographer and artist, Simone Kenyon – and a team of female collaborators – over the course of a year and culminating in a public walk and performance in Glen Feshie between 30th May and 2nd June. The website states:

Through working directly within the unique environment of the Cairngorms plateau and with women living within the communities of the National Park, Into the Mountain celebrates women’s encounters with mountainous environments, addressing both historical and current perspectives of gender and access in relationship to the Scottish landscape.

I was reminded that I often feel slightly awkward about all female events. I even feel awkward mentioning this…

I had no problem with the ‘all women’ composition of the artists and organising team, but was wondering how much we might be presented with a kind of essentialist relationship between women and the earth, the mountains.

I knew virtually nothing about Nan Shepherd before the event but after a little research towards writing this I am very disposed to find out more and have just ordered her book.

Of many, two characteristics seem crucial to the project: it is led, planned, organised and performed by women; and is framed and inspired by the Scottish modernist writer, poet, walker and lover of mountains, Nan Shepherd (1893-1981) and particularly her book, The Living Mountain, written in the 1940’s, but not published until 1974. Later, we discover that Nan Shepherd is the first Scottish woman to be pictured on a banknote: a series of £5 notes issued by the Royal Bank of Scotland in 2016. The image of Shepherd here is distinctive and offers us a glimpse, perhaps, of eccentricity and resolution: she is wearing a headband made of photographic film at the centre of which is a brooch. Allegedly she picked up the film whilst sitting in a local photographer’s studio and whimsically wound it around her forehead. Alongside the topographical frame of the Cairngorms, Nan Shepherd’s writing in The Living Mountain is clearly a very strong driving presence, informing both Simone’s vision for the whole project and our – the participants – experience of it.

The guided public walks and performances span three days (Friday, Saturday and Sunday) and on each day applications are invited for participants to sign up for a long (6-7 hours), mid (5-6 hours) or short (4-5 hours) route. Starting times for each route are staggered so that all 3 (maximum 10 people per group) are scheduled to arrive at the performance space high up in Glen Feshie at roughly the
A difficult assessment for us, especially given changeable weather.

same time. The online process of booking is a mite nerve-wracking as the limited number of places and route options become sold out within a few hours of the site going live. The choice of route is determined by our own self-assessment of ‘fitness and experience’. We opt for the short route which has to be on the Friday as the two other days are already booked up.

Between booking and our actual trip to the Cairngorms we are sent copious and slightly alarming information on what is required of us in terms of footwear, protective clothing, sustenance and ‘other useful things’ which include: first aid kit, plasters, midge and bug repellent, head net for midges, tick tweezers, antiseptic gel and sun cream. On the day, the latter proves to be completely superfluous. In addition, we are given precise timings about when to arrive and parking details. Evidently, huge care and attention has been invested in our preparation for Into the Mountain.

At around 10pm on the evening before our journey the three of us are eating and drinking wine before a leisurely planned departure from Glasgow at around 9.30am so as to be in Kincraig for registration and the minibus which will take us to the foot of Glen Feshie for 12.45pm. A mobile rings and a member of Simone’s planning team urgently tells us that their ‘Health and Safety Advisor’ has required a significant change of plan for the given predicted weather conditions. We are asked if we can leave much earlier to be in the Cairngorms for 9.30. The weather is predicted to be wet in the morning and to turn severe by early afternoon and this necessitates some quite drastic rescheduling with the mid and long route groups having to shorten the length of their walking and for us, the short routers, to start three hours earlier than planned. We leave Glasgow in the rain at 6.30am.

Did our commitment to participate wobble at this point?

I wobbled at this juncture.

Outside the Kincraig Post Office Cafe we are welcomed by Simone, provide registration details and are checked for the strength of our waterproof leggings and anoraks. Here, too, the stoutness of our respective boots is inspected and passes muster. We take a 20 minute minibus ride to the car park at the base of Glen Feshie. There, standing in a circle, we meet our guided walk facilitator, Mags Kerr, and mountain guide/leader, Kathy Grindrod. We are asked to introduce ourselves and Mags explains the schedule to

We wondered about this, how potential audiences were sought.

I sense that all three groups on our day at least - the Friday – were largely artists, walkers or mountaineers. Mainly people ‘in the know’ through artists’ networks. Does this matter? I am not sure, but it’s the kind of issue I often trouble over.

I found these preparations strangely fascinating. I felt a real sense that I was being prepared for the unpredictable by those who were familiar with the unpredictability of weather in Scottish mountains.

Up until this point I was participating but not invested.
Yes, likewise. I love the conundrum of preparing for the unpredictable. Nonetheless, the rituals of preparation, the detail, the care and attention I found reassuring and pleasurable.

This changed on meeting Kathy and Mags. Self-introduction within a group is performative: we are participants, not mere observers, and we are answerable to each other.

I am sometimes unsure what the expectation is. Sometimes I wanted to be silent but felt a little anxious about being so.

My slight anxieties about being preached to – finger wagging – disappeared once We start to walk up a well-defined path. It begins to rain, although not heavily. Initially, we walk through woods with the side of the Glen falling away to our right. As we get higher the trees disappear as the landscape opens out to display mountains either side and in front of us. As these are the Cairngorms the surfaces seem softer and more rounded than the jagged and craggy landscapes of Scotland’s western and most northerly highlands. The walking offers a steady, but not overly demanding ascent, occasionally requiring small leaps across burns feeding their way into the valley below. Our group numbers about 12, including two guides and the doctor. We walk, sometimes in silence, sometimes in conversation, the configuration of the group morphing in and out of affability.
Kathy and Mags started their interventions. There was something about the skilful matter-of-factness – an understatedness in their tone, register and delivery I found both compelling and relaxing.

Our walking is punctuated by gentle interventions from Mags and Kathy. Mags has a copy of Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain* and on four or five occasions we stop as she reads short extracts from her evidently well used copy. Her book has many markers, marginalia and that malleable softness peculiar to well and lovingly handled volumes. The extracts, we discuss later, are short and – we assume – carefully selected. Mags’ manner is undidactic, respectful but not hagiographic. We wonder whether all three groups are hearing the same extracts, or whether each guide has made her own selections. Maybe the groups doing longer routes hear more selections. Framing the extracts, Mags sometimes invites us to undertake simple somatic tasks: centring our feet, shifting balance, exploring peripheral vision, focusing near and far, and always the desirability of finding a mindful presence in our walking. Mountain guide, Kathy, whom we learn has extensive experience across Scotland, Wales and the Alps, also works to assess snow density and the likelihood of avalanches. She clearly has considerable knowledge of mountain plant life too, as she stops us from time to time, to look closely at tiny flowers growing unobtrusively on either side of the path, at the same time pointing out subtle changes in the landscape as we walk higher up the Glen. On one occasion Kathy identifies a miniature blue flower which traps flies, and on another she points to stunted rowan trees which are unable to grow much beyond three feet due to their altitude and the climate of the Cairngorms. Both Mags and Kathy perform their tasks and readings in a pleasingly unassuming manner, revealing things to many of us which we have never before encountered. They evidently know their mountains well, and clearly have much passion for these landscapes and the flora and fauna therein.

I was being helped to become aware of how I become aware. My imagination and sense of wonder in the potential of the environment was sparked by Kathy describing her winter job as Avalanche Predictor in the Cairngorms.
We wondered how much we can consider the weather as performer – it caused us to pull our hoods up – creating a tight frame for viewing, we arranged our body positions to avoid the water seeping through the gaps in our clothing...

The formality – the marking off – of the performance (dancers and choir), beguiling though much of it was, felt slightly out of kilter with the more informal and open-ended spirit of the

As we ascend it is unclear where our destination actually lies. At one moment Kathy points to another group on the skyline who are clearly in the mid or long route categories. As we get higher the rain becomes more intense and we seem to have branched off to the left of the main valley. We are approaching a small flattish plateau beneath what would be the final climb to the surrounding, almost semi-circular ridge above us. We are requested not to walk on the flat areas since this will be part of the performance space for the dancers and singers. As we arrive in this natural amphitheatre we are given large square tarpaulins and invited to sit around the outside of the protected area. Two other groups arrive and follow the same procedure as we roughly inscribe a semi-circle around the performance space. We wait, finish sandwiches and feel the rivulets of water flowing down the slight incline of the tarpaulin and around (and underneath) where we are sitting. We see a huddle of singers but no dancers. We wait. Although the experience and the site is hugely dissimilar from a conventional theatre or performance space, the ritual of arrival, preparation, gathering and waiting seems curiously similar to the conventions and protocols of going to watch live performance in traditional urban spaces. It happens that we three are sitting on the outer edge of the tarpaulin

Turning a bend in the path and suddenly seeing the choir huddled together in the distance felt a little like putting a pencil mark on a piece of paper. A figure and ground, a new evaluation of a sense of space and scale.

We also wondered to what extent this aspect of the site-sensitive performance could be adapted to more conventional theatre settings?
walking, the
talking, the
listening, the
silences. Can’t
quite put my finger
on it but I felt I
would have liked
greater porosity
(temporal & spatial) between
the ‘performance’,
the mountains, the
participants and
the rest of the
event.

The choir numbers about 12 women recruited locally, we
are told, and is led by vocalist, Lucy Duncombe. The vocal
score they perform has been composed by Finnish and
Edinburgh based musician and sonic artist, Hanna Tuulikki.
The performance begins with the choir performing cuckoo
sounds which seem to prompt an echoing response from
the surrounding mountainside. Gradually it becomes clear
that the responses are from the dancers positioned high
above and who, after a while, start to run down, leaping
through and over the heather towards our performance
site. The five dancers gather on the flat but very wet
‘plateau’, performing movements inspired by aspects of
Shepherd’s writing through the medium of Simone
Kenyon’s choreography. From first boundings down the
mountain slopes, the dance lasts about 30 minutes and is
dominated by movements of rising and falling to the point
where the performers finally sink to the earth. As we are
seated facing outwards, away from the performance – and
no-one else appears to be standing – our sight lines are
quite restricted making it difficult to take in the ensemble
dancing in its entirety. Throughout the dance the choir
makes sonic interventions from time to time and we are
each struck – in situ and later in conversation – by the
beautifully elegant woollen jumpers worn by each of the
dancers. It is unclear when exactly the performance
finishes until that moment when the dancers’ relaxed
smiles and quotidian postures seem to signal that this part
of the event is over. This ending is made more manifest by
one of the dancers, an ex Dartington student, coming over
to greet us.

I did feel a little
irked that I could
not see all the
dancers at work when
they arrived in the
marked performance
space. Perhaps
annoymed with myself
in retrospect that I
did not simply stand
up, turn around and
look but felt
inhibited as few (or
no) others were doing
so.

Was this a gradual
‘loosening’ of our formal
participation in the event(s)?

We become aware that we are expected to move back
down the mountain but to keep within our existing groups.
Before this happens there is some uncertainty and fluidity
as to what is expected of us. That hesitation and ambiguity
as to how one takes leave of a performance. What are the
protocols, how long to mingle and can we speak to friends
identified in the other two groups? On the way back down

It was an interesting part of our
reflection to make conscious
what is often unconscious in
performance etiquette –
It’s always interesting how ‘returns’ almost always feel shorter than the ‘goings’. We remain as a group but probably more spread out than on the ascent. Formally, neither of our guides make further interventions of the kind performed on the ascent, but are open to informal conversations and questions. We are overtaken at certain points by members of the choir, hurrying, perhaps, to return to their daily lives in the locality below. Before we load into minibuses to return to the Post Office Café, farewells are bid and we offer unaffected thanks and appreciation to Mags and Kathy.

The rain performed immaculately.

Back in Kincraig we decide not to wait for the bowl of soup promised to us. The weather and consequent rescheduling of the three groups have messed up the original timetable for the café, and we have been up since 5.30. We note that the rain ceased almost as soon as the performance ended. However, as we drive home to Glasgow through Perthshire and Stirlingshire it returns with great intensity.

I feel pleased to have been, to have participated. Our ensuing conversations – and separately with two work colleagues – have added hugely to the richness and complexity of the experience. I enjoyed particular details but equally the experience as a total ‘event’.

starts/ends etc. These things become invisible via familiarity and expectation. Is this the same for a walk on the mountain? Do we not see things because they are familiar to us? Did the project help us see things differently?
Afterthought:
unconnectedly, I have been reading about the NVA’s large scale projects on Skye (The Storr, 2005) and in Glen Lyon (Path, 2000) and speculating how these ostensibly similar projects differed dramaturgically and in aspiration.