

Live Art in Scotland: Mamoru Iriguchi

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Stephen Greer (SG): Maybe I could just ask you about your first encounters with performance and live art, or what brought you into the field? I know that you studied theatre design. Was that the first step, or were there steps before that that brought you into the territory?

Mamoru Iriguchi (MI): I was working as a lighting technician-cum-lighting designer in Japan for three years before I moved to the UK, and when I was studying zoology, I was doing dramatic society at university. Before that, I was never interested in theatre or any sort of performative things, so it was slightly coincidental. I really wanted to do set design, that was my main interest. I moved to the UK in 1996 and then I started to work as a theatre designer for a good ten years before I started to accumulate ideas that were basically ditched by the directors that I worked with. I thought, okay, there are so many good ideas – I thought [laughs] whether or not anyone else thought that I don’t know – it would be a shame not to use them somewhere. Then I was looking for a small opportunity to try ideas out. I was also interested in doing everything myself, partly because I didn’t have money to pay anybody else and I wanted to be as demanding as possible and working with somebody else, you always have to be very grateful. Of course, I would be, but there was nothing I could actually offer. So I thought, I’ll do it on my own and then at least I can be demanding. At that point, I met two people working in live art; Nikki Tomlinson and Cheryl Pierce, both of whom were then working with Artsadmin. They said “it looks like what you want to do is more live art”.

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Before that, I was just thinking this is a kind of theatre and I didn't even know about live art to be honest. Meeting Cheryl and Nikki was quite a big "ah okay, so there are people who are doing something not dissimilar to what I was trying to do" [moment]. My first performance happened in the café of Artsadmin. I realised that there were people who appreciated something like this and that's how it all started.

SG: Wonderful. So Nikki Tomlinson is someone that you worked with on quite a few different projects since then as a dramaturg? Has that been her role in your work?

MI: Yes. She was interested in that kind of work as well. Her work is more about producing or artist advisory [at Artsadmin], but [...] with such rich knowledge in live art [...] and also performance art per se, she was a brilliant dramaturg. That was a good collaboration for both of us, I think.

SG: I'm interested in the vocabulary and the aesthetic of your work. There are a few different aspects, but we could start with how you're working with video and projection, often with versions of yourself, but always with versions of yourself mixed in with action or a live element. Was that there from the very start of your work, or is that something that you think has developed as you've become more interested in it over time?

MI: As a set designer I was almost actively disinterested in projection or any technology. I started my performance practice in 2008/2009. But just before that the prices of projectors came down quite a lot and all of the theatre companies that I worked with suddenly started to ask me to do some projection, which was annoying. But I thought, okay I have to do this because otherwise I won't get jobs [laughs]. So I started working with it and I just wanted to do something slightly different. I also didn't like the pixelated picture that the projectors then produced. But I thought that is interesting: that is so ugly there is something human about it. It's not beautiful, it's not like a projector that we have today. I think in that clunkiness and that ugliness, there is something human. That led to the ideas about how we use projectors without showing off the kind of hi-techness in a way. I think that is still my interest. By doing that, I think there are some ideas that I would use later on. Although I didn't like the opportunities that came to me, I thought ultimately, I got on quite well. I see technology as something that shows the limitations that we have, which resonated with any limitations we have. We always feel some sort of limitations or restrictions around us. I

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think that technology is a symbol of that, rather than possibilities in a way. That's where I see its potential.

SG: I read an interview, which I think was about one of the shows in your *4D Cinema* series, where you talked about one of the ideas that informed it. That it was a response to audiences and their tendency to watch a projection and forget about the presence of the live performer. So the design of *4D Cinema* is literally a way of making audiences pay attention to the projection and you, the performer, at the same time.

MI: Yes. [Laughs] When projection became really popular, everyone wanted big projection, as big as possible, and often that would make the audience forget about the performers. I went to see one huge production at National and the projection was so powerful I was crying, but not because of performers. It was historical footage and showed how horrible some human beings could be. This is moving, but this is wrong. Poor actors, working hard and I didn't even pay attention to them and I think that is wrong.

SG: It feels like with the *4D Cinema* series, at least for me, a lot of the pleasure as an audience member is the dynamic between what is live and what is recorded, and also what is maybe both live and recorded in the same instance. I know there have been a few different iterations in this series. Could you say a little bit more about the series of *4D Cinema* and how it has developed?

MI: God, it's six years ago that I made that show. [Laughs] That was a starting point, to show myself and something else on the screen at the same time and let the audience enjoy both. However, it kind of became the exploration of time in the piece. For the first piece in the *4D Cinema* series, I pretend to be Marlene Dietrich who was obviously dead, even at that point. The dead person [on screen] can be as lively as myself who is actually alive. There was the quite powerful presence of a dead person versus a [live] performer who is hardly known to anyone, but at least this person is alive and in front of you doing things and this person could change the course of the performance, whereas the person on screen, however powerful she may be, can't change anything. The first half of the performance was filmed and in the second half, that first half is played back for the audience, but it's played in reverse, so you see the end of the first half at the start, then the beginning of the show at the end. I add different meaning to the show via live subtitle, so that part is live. Then the piece ends with the audience member sort of exiting the space walking backwards. I think

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that walking backwards bit was quite important, probably the most important in the show in a way. That's where the audience can actually encounter themselves just fifty minutes younger than they are now. There is a sense of time and that we are just moving forward and you can never really go back unless you become a movie star and you're fixed permanently on film. This form was interesting and I could use projection in a slightly different way so I made a few more pieces. They're all short pieces roughly around that theme of time and projection versus live.

SG: It's really interesting hearing you describe that film version of the encounter with themselves. If I can test your memory even more, I was looking through your back catalogue of work, prior to the *4D Cinema* series, at things like *One Man Show* which was this experiment in you multiplying versions of yourself but also multiple perspectives of the live event as you might experience it if you were sitting in different seats within a massive theatre, whether you were sitting in the gods or sitting in the stalls. Do you remember that project, can you say a little bit about where that came from?

MI: Before that work, there was a work that I wanted to present via dance platform and from then on, The Place, a dance venue in London supported my work for a while. *One Man Show* was a commission for that. The different viewpoints in theatre and the fact that everybody is seeing slightly different things in live performance is something that I'm really curious about, as opposed to any two-dimensional dramatic media such as TV, film, or computer screen where everybody is seeing the same thing. There may be a slight difference if you look at it from an acute angle, but you won't see anything extra by changing the viewpoint. Whereas theatre or live performance is the complete opposite, you can see something completely different. I think that notion is quite important in my practice. That's an important part of liveness for me and I wanted to demonstrate to an audience that you think you're seeing the same thing but you're actually seeing very different things. The character of any performance that's happening in front of you could grow or be understood in different ways in each individual audience member. It was slightly deliberate. It started as the five different versions of myself who is in the middle doing live performance but filmed from four different cameras in different positions. That was then taken over by pre-recorded footage of myself as a different version of this character who is trying to do, basically Hamlet, but it becomes totally different. But we are all still in the

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same room and it was almost quite emotional. Everyone is in the same room, seeing the same thing but thinking or understanding in totally different ways.

SG: The way you're describing it is making me remember seeing *What You See When Your Eyes Are Open / What You Don't See When Your Eyes Are Closed*.

MI: It's the same line of work, I think, but it's still work-in-progress. It was meant to be finished by last October but obviously [because of the pandemic] I don't know when we can start re-developing and actually finalise it. It's a [two-hander piece] about visual perception in live performance. The big thing is how differently the event can be viewed by audience members. I still find it really difficult to work on –[...] the traverse configuration [where] the audience are on two sides. One character is a Cyclops, hairy, one-eyed monster who is trying to see everything two-dimensionally. The other is a human who is trying to be live and as live as possible. Ultimately that performance I did for BUZZCUT was more to do with things that I'd like to explore rather than anything that would be in the final piece. It's a battle between a person and a monster so it's a kind of monster slayer thing, but I don't know yet.

SG: That gives me an in to ask you about your process of developing work when you do early shows or scratch showings. Are you treating them as the working out of ideas more than the testing out of actual moments of performance, or is it always a blend and you don't quite know what you're going to take forward after a particular showing?

MI: I think because of my background in theatre design, I always have images first. I have an image that I want to see, or there is one scene that I want to see. Obviously sometimes it comes with some thematic things, but the visual perception has always been my interest. There's a book called *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* that was written in the late 1970s by an American researcher [James J. Gibson]. I failed to read that book when I was a student many years ago. It's a bit of revenge in a way on my younger self [laughs], I need a project that makes me read this book. So usually, images and then very short sequences of performative ideas and then I'll do research if there is anything that's actually worth exploring [laughs].

SG: Maybe we'll come back and talk a little bit more about BUZZCUT and your experiences of working with them. I also wanted to ask you about what feels like another major strand

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of your practice, which is making performances for and with younger audiences. When did you start making work for younger audiences?

MI: That coincided with me moving to Scotland actually after years of back and forth between Edinburgh and London. In London, I started to go out with somebody who was in Edinburgh. And after two years we decided to live together. My now husband got a permanent job here, so it made much more sense for me to move up here, which I think was the right thing. Back then I felt slightly sad leaving London. But anyway, I had an idea for a show about eating, or more about being eaten and I thought that was something I could share with a much broader audience. I don't know why I thought "let's do that with children". I think all my shows are like kids' shows anyway. I don't think I can think of anything too complicated so the starting point is always quite simple. In this particular show I wanted to have a cuddly lion, so I thought, "let's do it as a kids' show". Some of my projects were supported by National Theatre Studio in London which were run by Laura Collier and Sarah Jane Murray who used to work at Traverse, so they knew lots of people in Edinburgh or Scotland per se. They said "why don't you ask for some help from Imagine?" Without that I think it [my projects for children] could've been one-off, but because Fiona Ferguson from Imagine was so supportive and she was quite interested in bringing in performance and live art into young people's performance sector. I was genuinely interested as well! I really enjoyed performing it to young people. It's a very different audience compared to a live art audience. It felt really refreshing to perform to a group of people who may or may not appreciate anything that I'm doing on stage. When they didn't like it, their reaction was so honest. It's a slightly masochistic pleasure. That was shit, that's what they say and it's like okay, fine, I'll have to do something to change it. Developing with children was quite a scary but really interesting process. I found it really fulfilling to make work with young people.

SG: I was looking at some of the images of the work, at things like *The Tallest* which is a participatory work. Was that done for National Museums of Scotland? I've got an image, one of the photographs, I can recognise the building.

MI: Yes. It was part of [...] the **Family Day of the** Edinburgh International Children's Festival.

SG: One thing that I was interested in was your sense of the broader network or the broader territory that your work was coming into and your sense of any peers or people whose work

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has come along before you or alongside you, or whose work sort of feeds yours. You've mentioned a few different people who've been really supportive or who you've worked with already, but that broader landscape. When did you recognise that you might be making live art, or that that's where there might be a space for your work. Were there other people whose work you were looking at and thinking there is a similar vocabulary here, or there's a very different vocabulary but their work feeds mine?

MI: The first artist I worked with in Japan was somebody called Tadashi Suzuki who does more traditional theatre. You might know his name because of his actor training method called Suzuki method, which is known to some people. He was doing classic Shakespeare and Greek tragedy, but his company does it with a very specific physicality. The other thing was he asked everybody in the company to do this quite rigorous physical training every day. I actually got a job as a lighting technician for this company, however, I [...] had to do this stomping thing every day for a few hours. He was often shouting at the actors, [...] so that their physicality became strong enough to communicate with an audience, that was his starting point. I thought okay, that's understandable and I [witnessed] a sense of communication between the audience and the performers [emerged]. Now looking back, that is really essential for live art as well, how much that physicality, or the body in front of you can communicate with you is crucial, I think. That was my starting point. Then I started to work in this country as a theatre designer and the first few years I was just assisting some designers, including David Fielding who predominantly did opera and still does. I was struck by his aesthetic, which is so two-dimensional. Later on, I think that links to my fascination or hatred of projection in a way. His design was really daring and I always thought it's a shame that only people who go to opera can see what he does, which I think is so accessible and so radical and interesting. I kind of inherited aesthetics from him. Once I started to do my own design, the biggest influence was a company called the Cardboard Citizens who work with people with experiences of homelessness, and they employ those people. They do lots of workshops and they use actors from that background and create employment opportunities for those people who are sometimes struggling. What was interesting to me was they have to tour this show to homeless hostels in London where people are not at all interested in the show, so all the shows are very accessible in terms of content and language. There is something artistically really interesting about the show thanks to Adrian [Jackson] and Sarah

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Woods who often writes their shows. It was refreshing to find shows that satisfy that wide spectrum of audience, from people who are only there because they can receive a voucher for meals to somebody who is actually coming to see that from a more theatrical viewpoint, or [those] who are middle-class theatregoers. That is what I would like to do in a way. I like to make something that can talk to anyone, even if what they get from it might be slightly different. I don't want to exclude anyone. Those are the big artistic influences for me. Since I've started to make performance in a live art space, Pacitti [Company (Spill Festival)] has been really supportive. That was the first time I showed my work to a wider live art audience and I also got to know lots of artists in the field. I met Ivor MacAskill in London when he was developing some work at National Theatre Studio and that relationship continued and I'm really grateful for that. In the dance world, Freddie Opoku-Addaie who has just become the director of Dance Umbrella in London. We've been collaborating on and off for quite a few years. There's another person called Susanne Zaun who is an artist based in Frankfurt. I took my work to a venue called Mousonturm in Frankfurt which is a kind of centre for performance art in that part of Germany and she saw it. She's an associate artist of Mousonturm and we developed quite a few shows. She sometimes does kids' shows when the state asks her to do slightly more normal productions as well as more strange things that she does for Mousonturm. [I also often works with Brian Lobel. For his projects I am often involved in as graphic and theatre designer]. They're the main people that I worked with and I think their influence is informing and inspiring my practice.

SG: That's great. It's really interesting hearing you talk about your collaborations or involvement with dance as a space. The overlap between dance and live art is interesting to me because I think it might also be significant in Scotland. I'm trying to trace the history of it. I know that you presented work at GoLive Dance and Performance Festival which was programmed by Donald Hutera. Was that the first time your work crossed over into the space of dance, or was there a longer standing relationship?

MI: The first time I did it was at The Place because they do this season called Resolution in January. That's the only period of time that they programme from call-out applications. Anyone can apply and there are a lot, three performances a day. There is no fee and it's a real showcase for emerging dance artists. In the previous year, I designed something for that and I thought that's interesting and it's a nice space, so I applied and they picked it up.

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If anything, I got lots of laughs. Dance audiences are quite vocal when they see shows. So that was the starting point and then Donald saw that piece later, somewhere else, and that's when we had a conversation. He's predominantly a dance critic but he had quite a huge desire to make something and to work more creatively and that [GoLive] was one of his initiatives. He curated evenings of dance-related or choreographic performances.

SG: That's the word, choreography. The choreographic is the expanded frame that's in my head that describes the conversations between dance and other practices in live art. You've mentioned Artsadmin and a few of the other organisations in London and I know you showed some work at Battersea Arts Centre at different points. I'm interested in your sense of the role of organisations like that in your practice, but also are there parallels in your experience in Scotland? I know you've showed work at Summerhall, we've mentioned BUZZCUT and the CCA in passing. Is there a similar structure of support up here in Scotland or is it different? I'm conscious that London has a unique set of circumstances attached to it and that whenever you leave London and try and compare it to somewhere else, it's always a bit of an artificial comparison. So maybe the question is, what's your sense of the opportunities for support and development in Scotland? Does it feel like there's a landscape here?

MI: I think so. I've been very well supported since I moved to Scotland. That was one of my biggest fears when I was moving from London because I knew quite a lot of people and organisations in London. I knew that when you move from one place to the other, you often have to start from scratch in a way and that's very hard work. It feels much more personal in Scotland. The community is smaller than even London alone in a way because London is so huge and everybody is very busy in London. I'm not saying that people in Scotland are not busy [laughs]. I think people working in the arts are always busy, but everything feels slightly less distant in a way. The first step is always the hardest, to get to know people and to expose your work to people in a new place. I think I did my first BUZZCUT while I was still in London. I remember saying to Rosana and Nick, I am moving to Scotland [so, please pick up my show!] It's such a friendly community that is already there, that they'd established over the years. I think that helped a lot.

SG: I feel like you're an artist who has moved back and forth between Edinburgh and Glasgow really successfully, whereas other people I talk to feel like their practice is really

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located and they make work in Glasgow with people in Glasgow institutions and that they don't have anything going on in Edinburgh and a little bit vice versa. People who are based in Edinburgh don't get on a train [laughs].

MI: Yes, I mean to me, I did suggest to my husband, "could we move to Glasgow because all the cool people live in Glasgow and the live art people live in Glasgow. Nobody is in Edinburgh!" That's very rude to the artists who are living in Edinburgh, but that's what I said. [Laughs]. He rejected that idea immediately and said "No, I would never live in Glasgow!" So he's one of those people [who don't get on a train] I think.

SG: [Laughs]. My experience of living in Edinburgh, I thought there was a phenomenal art scene and a really great visual art scene, but the life of live art and live performance in Edinburgh was dominated by the Fringe and it was really hard to find space or energy outside of the Festival cycle. I don't know if that's still true, but that was when I was living there. Does that still feel the same now?

MI: The centre of live art is definitely Glasgow. If you think about experimental performance art and where it is happening in Scotland, I think that is Glasgow and there's no doubt about it. I think that's fine in a way. It's not far away, it's only forty-five minutes. I haven't been to Glasgow for a year now, which is very strange. In some ways, I did a few things for Tramway [online] so even though I wasn't there, I was kind of there. During the pandemic, in a way, where you actually were didn't actually matter. Going back to your question, I think it's fine Glasgow being the centre of live art and Edinburgh being slightly different.

SG: I suppose the follow-on question from this is what the Fringe Festival is like. Do you see that as a space where you want to take work, where there is a space for other artists working in a similar territory for you, or not?

MI: I do feel all the criticism about the Fringe, that it was so commercialised and expensive to do. If I wasn't in Edinburgh, I would find it very hard. The financial pressure is so huge that I can't casually take work there. I feel very lucky that I'm already here and I can do it if I want to. For me, it's a great opportunity to share work and see fellow artists' work without going anywhere. The financial problem is not just about the systematic problem of Fringe society, it's far bigger than that. The price of accommodation is made sky-high by somebody else, developers and people who are trying to make money out of it. I kind of feel nostalgic

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about the Fringe Festival in the seventies, but I don't think we can easily go back there. I don't have an immediate answer. I'd like it to be a more open Festival. Also, Brexit, who can actually come to perform from outside of the UK. It's a very scary thing.

SG: I feel like this year, because of the pandemic, lots of festivals have shifted to blended or online formats and that we perhaps haven't felt the impact of Brexit on the ability of artists to travel internationally quite yet, because people have been able to make work from Austin, Texas or from somewhere in Milan, or wherever they may be based. We maybe haven't felt the repercussions of it yet. The final thing I wanted to ask you about because it's the thing of yours that I've seen most recently, was the piece that you made for Tramway TV, which was their series of digital commissions over the last six months and yours was a piece called *Zoom Dark Mode*. I watched parts of the live version and there's a documented version online. Can you tell me a little bit about that work and how it came about?

MI: During the pandemic, I decided that I'd like to do something slightly different from what I had been doing. That was a very zen participatory work. Basically, I wondered if Zoom could be used for something that doesn't stress out the people there and they still feel a sense of community. I asked the participants to submit a little bit of recording from their window at night and I put them together and turned the light off and display a pseudonym rather than our real name, so your presence is completely anonymous and you're in the dark just listening to the orchestrated sound of the night together. I was quite happy to propose that, because I wouldn't have done that without the pandemic because there are other artists who are very good at that sort of work. I also felt slightly shy about doing something that's not funny ha-ha. I'm not used to it, but I thought [Tramway TV] was a safe environment to try out something like that, because of the pandemic. That was really interesting and luckily some people responded and gave me feedback afterwards saying that it was really nice to be in that space for forty minutes.