

Live Art in Scotland: Paul Michael Henry

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Stephen Greer (SG): I've been starting these conversations by asking people about their first encounters with performance or performance art or live art, whether it was seeing it or studying it or something else. I'm really wary about the neatness of any origin story, but I'm interested in first encounters.

Paul Michael Henry (PMH): It's interesting because you sent me these questions last night and so obviously my cogs have been turning a little bit. In terms of my first encounter with performance or performance art or live art, I don't know. This might become a bit of a running theme in our conversation. I feel like I've sort of arrived in contexts that are often seen as performance or live art without ever sort of deciding that that's where I wanted to be. The short answer is that I was a DIY musician originally and my first years of making art were in punk rock scenes and things like that. Mid-twenties that wasn't working for me anymore and I was stumbling around looking for something and stuff around physicality, around my body rather than my intellect, started to become important for me for personal growth. It was partially to do with my own mental health to figure out what was going on with myself. I started studying some ritual theatre stuff with a Finnish author living in the states and that was amazing, quite life changing but also abstract because he was thousands of miles away. I wasn't thinking about live art or performance, I was just trying to fix myself I think. At a certain point, Butoh dance started to circle me. Having never heard of it, it just seemed to arrive in my life from different directions. It was happenstance; I saw a poster

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saying Butoh training and did one session and thought, okay this is what I do now. I trained really hard and was stumbling around and by a year or two after that, I was starting to make performances that still had music in it, but I was dancing. I've always been a writer so there might have been text in it. It might have then expanded in duration, or shortened, or be shortened. Before I knew it, I thought who else is doing this sort of thing and the obvious answer seemed to be live art. I definitely didn't come out of any lineage. I didn't train in live art. I didn't see Marina Abramović and have my mind blown or anything like that. Through another trajectory, I've ended up where I am. Having been in those circles for ten years or something, I've seen lots of live art, stuff that has just been great and has no doubt unconsciously contributed to what I continue to make, but I feel like to some extent I arrived on that scene in as much as I did, not fully formed but I guess I had my formative influences already. It was more about where does the work I want to make fit into this landscape rather than feeling that I came out of any lineage.

SG: That's really interesting. That training, or that initial encounter with the Butoh workshop, was that in Scotland?

PMH: Yes, it was one of my best friends in the world, an Italian guy called Yuri Dini who is younger than me. It's a really random, ragged story. His girlfriend was finishing her teacher training year in Glasgow. She's French and she moved to Glasgow to do that. He was at a loose end in Italy, so he came over. He was only here for nine months but got bored enough that he put up a couple of posters for Butoh workshops just at the time when I'd been hearing this word. It was a bit ridiculous, I think we did our first couple of performances in Kibble Palace in the Botanic Gardens, and we managed to get a bit of space in the basement at the Arches one week and that was about two months after I'd started dancing, so it was kind of absurd. I was ninety-nine per cent doing the music and then I would creep out from behind the instruments and dance a little bit and then immediately scuttle back behind the instruments. Slowly I was able to do this soft transition into a dance solo several years later when I felt like I'd earned it and I knew what I was doing. Without that, I might still be going to classes and rehearsals and wondering if I'd ever be ready to do a performance and maybe never get there. It was just the fact that Yuri needed someone on stage and I was like, oh to hell with it, I'll do it. Then he moved back to Italy, but he started inviting me over and twelve years later, we're still making stuff now but most often in Italy.

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SG: Great. I was going to ask about that collaborative relationship.

PMH: Yes, I've got quite a few but he's probably the earliest one in terms of performance land as opposed to just music.

SG: When you work with him, what's the process like, or does it change every time you work on a new project?

PMH: It changes every time, but I think one of the reasons we come together is that Yuri did anthropology and academically he's very steeped in myth and in particular, Greek myth. We tend to talk about the myth of the show and it's not always explicitly in those terms, but we talk about dream images and symbols. I've never asked him, but it's really flattering because he could've just started working with another musician in Italy when he went back but he kept inviting me over. His English is not fantastic and I think I've made it worse because I encourage mistakes, so he'll come out with these really poetic things and one ended up being the title for a show. He was trying to describe the section of a performance and he said we've had the chaos and then he went wistful and said, now I think we need something with a certain slowness and I was like, that's not a word but it is now [laughs]. The Italian-Scottish interplay probably comes into it quite a lot, but we're also working through Japanese myths, Greek myths, and then a lot of stuff about contemporary culture and how they might meet each other. With a lot of the performances I've done with him there's often a lot more going on under the hood than what we present to the audience. We might not necessarily be saying we were thinking about this Greek myth when we put this together, we might just leave that under the surface. There are layers and layers and there's usually a sort of philosophical, mythological underpinning. I know he's making a piece right now around the Anthropocene in relation to unfix and the myth of Prometheus and I don't know if that will get mentioned at all. He's got a very nuanced take on all of those things. I don't tend to do that when I'm not working with him, so I think that comes from Yuri and I think he's a great artist and there's a mode of making art that I go into when I'm working with him that I'm quite comfortable with.

SG: When you're working by yourself, and I'm conscious that when you work by yourself, you're nearly always working in relation to, or in partnership with others, but when you're working on solo pieces, what is the process there? Do you start by trying to get a blank

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studio or rehearsal space for yourself, or does it start with you sitting in a room in your flat or walking round a park?

PMH: It can be either. There are often ideas bubbling away, maybe things in notebooks. The horrible truth is that you often need a deadline and at some point that will intersect with a performance commission or an offer and then you'll sit with a blank page at a loss of what to do and then something will bubble up to the surface and you'll go, oh that's what this idea was for. It's for this gig that I have to do in this place in two months' time. Going right back to when I started in music in my teenage naivety, for all I was doing punk rock, I think I probably still had a Beethoven archetype in my mind. The architect of the work who has this dream and has then almost forced it on reality, you know, and there has been a humbling over the years that I've ended up really enjoying and that's not what I'm doing. What I'm doing is I've got ideas and then there's the world outside me and in collaboration with what's going on around me, the piece will arise. It doesn't all come from me, which is a nice thing to be comfortable with. It's true whether I like it or not, but it's ended up feeling appropriate. Why would I have this great master work in mind, it's not like that. Can I get studio space? There are probably some shows I've had to make in my living room. Even when it ends up on stage it might be taking up less space because the genesis of the piece was in a small space, for example. I often think about, this is obviously decreasingly okay to talk about but how much influence Ryanair has had on live art because you end up planning shows around can I fit it in the overhead locker [laughs], so that complete contingency but it forces you into having ideas and solutions. Last time I was touring just before covid, it was more can we get this on the train because the festival had requested that we don't fly so that was a really lovely experience. Sometimes it's literally about those nuts and bolts of logistics. For example, we had a big stage set and so we had to chop it down and find ways to fold it into suitcases and all that kind of stuff.

SG: I'm really interested in that pragmatic quality of all performance making as being really inseparable from the poetic, the aesthetic, the artistic and the political because for me, they've always been tied up. It's interesting seeing that there have been a few commissions recently which are international touring commissions, but they've been specifically framed as, we want you to think about international touring but specifically through the lens of not getting on a plane, or of your carbon footprint.

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PMH: It's interesting that that's starting to happen. I've had one experience so far of a festival in Germany who were just fantastic. They booked me partially because of the ecological bent of the work itself, I guess what it's trying to communicate, but they took it quite seriously and they were like we're the guys for that, we're doing this sort of ecological exploratory festival so we're not paying you to get on a plane to get here. I sort of said well that's probably going to cost more, and they said fine and paid for it. That was very unusual for me because most people can barely afford to book you in the first place. If we could have more of that it would be amazing.

SG: I've been thinking about how much of your work has seen you travel outside of Scotland and outside of the UK to perform, one of the things that I'm interested in is the spaces and places that do exist within Scotland for performance. I know that you've had an ongoing relationship with the CCA, partly through UNFIX which maybe we'll come to more in a moment, but also a few different performance spaces or nights in Edinburgh. Am I right in thinking that you performed at Anatomy?

PMH: Yes, several times actually.

SG: So, what's your sense of that sort of landscape of spaces and places? It feels that there are quite intense pockets of activity rather than a larger network of venues.

PMH: I think that's true. To start from the way you began the question, I'm definitely someone who for a long time and maybe still, found it much easier to make work abroad than here. I couldn't get a gig [laughs], I was rubbing my fingers raw writing application forms to the Scottish opportunities that were around. Like so many other artists, there were mountains of rejections and then suddenly you take a chance and write an application to something abroad and they would say yes. I remember the third gig I did, with Yuri again before I'd struck out on my own, was a fringe festival in Stockholm. We just sent off an application and didn't spend very long on it and they said yes. Yuri was also able to organise things in Italy. At a certain point over the last few years I do feel incredibly lucky, it's not constant or consistent, but I started being asked. I guess my name got around enough and I ended up doing a US tour because people had asked me, and stuff in Japan and France. That was where I was doing most of my work. I think I can remember how it must have looked on my social media, like he's doing what, but he never performs here. It's not through choice, I mean, I love doing stuff internationally and ideally, I would do both. This isn't me

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complaining about my artwork, I think it's a small country with a few pockets as you say of intense activity and whatever the convolutions for how my work might look to certain programmers, there was only a couple of people who ever really were up for it. As I've stuck with it and made my own platform through Unfix and all that kind of stuff, finally belatedly other people are interested as well. It's probably for the best in the end, although I find it hard to have much gratitude for it, that I felt so isolated about it that I made up a festival to some extent. Obviously, the festival is very genuinely what I'm saying it is, but in terms of the genesis of it, it's also completely related to a DIY Butoh touring festival with Yuri and several other known Butoh dancers and it made no sense logistically. We did Bologna, Dublin, Galway, Cork, and Glasgow because that's where we could get the gigs.

SG: Was that Moving Bodies?

PMH: Moving Bodies exactly! This is probably going to get boringly detailed at some point, but there was a Dublin Butoh festival and I'm half Irish so when I found out about that, I was like 'hardly anyone's even heard of Butoh!' And it was an Italian woman Ambra Bergamasco who is a Butoh dancer and was living in Ireland at the time. In Butoh terms it was like we were living next door. She booked me for the festival and it went well and she wanted to collaborate after that and before I knew it, she was suggesting this tour and I felt like I had to offer something from my end so I wandered into the CCA and just asked them and to their credit, they said yes. That went really well, to the extent that they invited me back the next year, but I sort of knew that, as there should be, there was a fairly low ceiling on the amount of people interested in strange, Japanese, white-painted oddballs and I thought this can't really be an annual thing. At that point, I started going back to the drawing board and interrogating everything I was doing and why I was doing it, and what other forms of art might resonate with it to broaden it out and Unfix came out of that articulation. It came out in a way that felt fantastic to me because I felt like I had been doing this niche within a niche that I just couldn't get booked on, but as soon as I flipped the language about what I was doing and why I was doing it, and I was saying the same things just with other words, and suddenly everyone seemed to know what I was talking about and it got some traction. In a way that's no bad thing in the end because there's one more platform for people to perform on.

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SG: I'm conscious now of Unfix as a festival with performance and ecological activism. You've got an open call at the moment and it's an open call to artists working in all art forms and it feels very deliberately expansive. Maybe we can chat a bit about the evolution of that curatorial approach, and also where you start with a process like that when you are extending this genuine offer to artists working across all art forms. When you are trying to look across the range of people who might come to you and then put together a programme, what's the process that you're going through, are you working primarily by yourself or is there a group of people at Unfix who are working with you?

PMH: It's a lot more appropriately organised now. Every Unfix that has happened in Glasgow there has been a Creative Scotland funding application attached to it and most of them have been a no. We did the first four events completely unfunded just trying to break even on things like ticket sales. The actual organisation of it was bound up with the fact that there was no cash, so I wasn't making appointments, it was more enthusiasm based. The first festival was in 2015, I think. We already had the whole programme, and me being wet behind the years, I'd booked way too much stuff, in a way that I think was great in the end even if it encouraged burnout. We'd taken over the whole building almost and we were using space in the stairwells in the CCA, but we also had the theatre and cinema room. By the time we got a no from Creative Scotland, all of that was programmed and there was this real sense of deflation, so I basically pushed the ecology metaphor one more time and got in touch with everyone involved and said okay, so the ecology of this thing is I've got loads of drive and passion for it, zero desire to exploit anyone, do we want to just cancel it. But there were enough people who said we've sort of got our energy up for it now so we just did it and the first time round one of the programmed artists built a website for us, two programmed artists helped with tech for all the other artists, so it was really collaborative and nobody got money back. I still feel bad about that even though I was honest up front. We did two more after that and at the third event there was a producer who was just coming out of CPP at Royal Conservatoire of Scotland who helped run it and that was the first time we had a proper producer on board. I think we still did it without funding. Sorry to make it so much about the money but it kind of is. It's not fair for me to put a team together and say there are no resources, so it has been a bit of a solo endeavour. In between each event it will go dormant and I'll just have a website sitting there and then at some point,

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either internally or externally due to prompting from outside, I'll try and get another edition on the go. I don't know if it's paying your dues, but last time which was 2019, we finally got some funding. It was half of what we asked for, but it was enough to have proper producers on board, Feral Arts, who were great. We chopped limbs off the programme as much as we had to to make it happen with the reduced funding. At that point, we had two producers involved, a stage management team, the things that I guess you should have at a festival but which were a first for us. We had a PR team and low and behold that was the first time we got any press. This time, the current call out, Creative Scotland finally said yes to what we asked. Feral can't make it so they'd done a handover and we've got a new producer. I have a programme assistant. Because it's got this DIY legacy written into it, I kind of just make up the job titles and they're all a bit in inverted commas, but there is a programme assistant who is almost doing the same thing I'm doing, she's amazing. Then there is a web guru I suppose, who again is a live artist who has just been really generous over the last few years and has given his free service for no reason other than to help out, so when it came to funding I said I'd like to pay you back for some of what you've already done. Similarly, some of the technicians are artists that I know and they've put in lots of free labour over the years for Unfix and I've said this time we've got funding, so please come back so that I can pay you for your hard work. There's a team of around five of us and then liaising with the venues and the international partners that I have, so it is quite a web at this point. Organically, I'm sort of at the centre of it and artistic directing the whole thing, but I'm sure there have been lots of mistakes due to the fact that I didn't train in this and didn't have much mentorship, I'm just sort of busking and trying to be as fair and transparent as I can. I think there are positives to that because it means that I'm not beholden to other notions, or I haven't been schooled in how to do it which obviously is good in some aspects, but it might lead to some sort of rigid thinking or sameness in other aspects, whereas Unfix is fairly genuinely experimental in that whatever we are getting right and wrong, we are making it up as we go along.

SG: I know that the call for this year is open at the moment so the process of programming is yet to come, or is only just starting.

PMH: Imminently, it's starting next week. Well, it's already happening in the background.

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SG: So between maybe this year and previous years, what is that programming process like? Are you doing quite pragmatic things like looking at your available spaces and just going okay, this is a certain scale of work and we only have space for four of these larger works, or is it not quite so mundane? Or is it a mix of things? What's the process that you go through?

PMH: Without droning on it's quite timebound this year with the pandemic. I had no desire to run a festival or be a programmer, I just blundered into it. I made up the best template that I could for the first festival in 2015 and I kind of still follow it. I'm waiting until it seems broken and I'm tweaking it. What I essentially did is put an open call out and chased some artists that I knew in the background, so a mixture of pre-programming and open call. The reasons for that are various. One reason for pre-programming is that I thought I do have to believe in the programme I put together and think it's amazing, because I don't know about other festivals but certainly with Unfix, there is a question of how much my aesthetic preferences should be allowed to dictate things and I keep tumble drying it. I don't think the answer is zero per cent because then you end up with an Edinburgh Fringe thing where anyone who applied got in and there are huge positives to be said about that but we're not on that scale. We're putting a short, hopefully coherent programme together that is designed from an audience's perspective. It's like, having seen this work, what do we need next.

SG: Also, you've got the explicit frame of ecological activism.

PMH: Yes, which really helps. It's a festival about stuff, so it's not just about whether the work is "good", not that there's any standard to that anyway, but there's a kind of extra question of how it fits with these themes and it doesn't have to be in very obvious ways. I'll pre-programme a few people and I might know some of that at the time the open call date closes, so for better or worse perhaps a bit of unfairness creeps in there, but I'm not sure what to do about it. I sort of approach it like a jigsaw or a mosaic and once you've got a couple of the big pieces in, that orientates you when you're looking at all of the other things because you can see a little thread linking that film to that durational performance, or that durational performance to this music thing, and somehow make this labyrinth that the audience experiences which is a mixture of pre-programme and open calls. The open call thing is something that I won't bend on, partially because of my own experiences in the industry and the bubbles and the nepotism and I don't want to perpetuate that if I can

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possibly avoid it. I'm sure we're not getting it entirely right, but the effort with the open call is to make it as easy to apply to as possible. We've subtracted a question in it this year that we used to have, which was what's your work, what form is it, what's the idea and how do you see it relating to the themes of Unfix, and I only realised this year that that was a mistake because what it did was put artists to a lot of mental labour to try and pitch to me that what they were doing was ecologically relevant and what I found was that some artists were turning somersaults. The completely understandable truth was that they just had their work and they wanted to show it somewhere and then they were searching for ways in which they could convince me that it was right for this and I could see right through it because it wasn't true to some extent. Or there were other people, whose work very obviously belonged on the programme so what's the point in them pitching it to me. So, I've removed all that and I've tried to just say what is the thing and we'll decide. I hope that's not brutal in any sense, but I'm very aware of artist's labour and how much goes into applying and I want them to make the minimum effort to tell me what the thing is for accessibility reasons, for all of those sorts of reasons. I want to be clear that even if you don't think this festival is for you, it might be and we're certainly not putting any barriers in your way to apply. Particularly because the festival is dealing with such huge themes, it is very self-consciously saying okay, let's look at the big things, the idea that the planet is burning and that surely should be in the room with any performance festival these days, or that's how I feel about it. What's the chance that I happen to know the best artists to address that, zero. I know the artists that I know for all sorts of bubbly, nepotistic reasons and so I want to hear from people that I've never heard of and within the small resources that we've got to try and get as many of them to say oh god I had no idea you were doing this kind of work and that's where it is genuinely cross-art form. In this context I don't care if it's live art or anything, it's just what's the thing. It's a flawed process because then it's like can I get lit up and excited about this thing that you're doing and that's obviously down to my own personal subjective and I try and manage that. I have programmed a few things that I wasn't wild about myself, but I could see that it was so relevant and there was a demographic of people who were into that, but the majority of things have been things that I thought were exciting. To try and wrap it up, what's great about this time is that Ane Lopez who is the programme assistant has a different background than me, gender difference as well, and has a background in film which I don't. I've always had some people advising me

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from the outside who were maybe more into visual art or contemporary art because I only know what I know and I can't speak knowledgeably about multiple art forms. To some extent I'm approaching it from I don't know what it is but I know what I like, which is a completely amateur approach to curation but I think there's something to be said for that, but also seeking advice and asking someone who knows about film if this is a good or a bad film. To now have some of those people officially on board advising and looking at these open call submissions is a really healthy thing so that it's not just coming from me, which is always what I wanted but without the resources it was the way it had to be for several years.

SG: It's interesting your framing of that as a sort of amateur approach and I genuinely don't know that it is. The question is maybe whether it's supported by resources or not. Curators might be drawing on their broad historical or contemporary knowledge of a field, but they're also drawn to what they like. I had an interesting conversation with someone yesterday who was talking a little bit about how like attracts like. When you curate or make space for a certain kind of work or make that kind of work yourself and it goes out into the world and is seen by an audience, that puts the signal out.

PMH: That has been my experience. I mean the amount of Butoh applications I'll get per year for Unfix is ridiculous and people that maybe know what it is that I do in my own work and they'll go that's the festival for me and I have to end up turning a lot of them down, but there is a bit of like attracts like, or what people think I will like, not that I'm that well known but it does creep into the applications.

SG: I suppose what I'm interested in there is your sense of Unfix and the broader landscape of festivals and events. Obviously in Scotland we have this huge Edinburgh Fringe which I think is a massive landmark on the landscape, however you feel about it, it's just a huge thing. This year, if it exists at all, will obviously exist in a radically different form. Where does your sense of your work both in programming and curating Unfix and as an individual sit alongside that larger territory?

PMH: I feel like I'm slightly tidying up my last question, I feel like I didn't get into what you asked there. This year the curation has been that the CCA have given us three days, they have three spaces, so absolutely that's been there in terms of the work that's being programmed. It's happening in Glasgow and not Edinburgh and all those things have an

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effect. We're now in the wild west in a sort of wonderful way I think with the pandemic and we're doing a largely online festival. There are huge drawbacks to that around live presence and communality, but because we're doing it mid-2021 I feel like we've had a year to get over ourselves about that and I don't want anything about why can't this be live because we know it can't, it's been a year now so let's just get on with it. We're actually freed up a lot having accepted that, in terms of being able to programme much more international work without thinking about carbon footprints because we won't bring them, and they'll do it online. That landscape has shifted so much in the last year anyway that my answer will possibly be out of date in six months because everything is moving so quickly.

SG: I think with all of these conversations, and this will partly come down to how I eventually frame them when they become a resource, is that as much as they are about the history or recent history of the performance scene, there are conversations happening right now and they're a snapshot of this moment in March 2021.

PMH: To answer your question properly, I think that it's bound up with where I see Unfix and my own stuff sitting in a Scottish arts landscape and maybe how it's perceived from outside. I think they are perhaps two different things. Unfix in particular was a hugely significant thing in my life because it was the first time that I'd found a way to say what I actually think, and I wasn't doing an elevator pitch to anyone or trying to fit into what I thought the existing arts industry wanted. I just took a punt and said what I personally think. I find it very easy to talk about Unfix and about my own work these days, but for years I didn't because I thought I should say buzzwords like live art and mention artists who will impress people and maybe then I'll get the gigs. With Unfix I've found it freeing to not feel that I'm hiding anything. Obviously, I want it to be successful and I'm trying to communicate it to as many people as possible, but it is honestly what I think and it's tied up with political and ecological issues in the tagline. I think where that met the existing performance landscapes, and I even had conversations with funders early on that were like sell it to us, what distinguishes it from BUZZCUT. To me from the inside, it was like what's similar about it, I don't even understand the question. It's a very clearly articulated platform that is about themes and, not because it's original or anything, it doesn't really relate to anything else going on around it other than the fact that a lot of the same artists might be traipsing through it. I think that's become clearer as I've stuck around and we've kept doing it. This

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year there are still people who are in Scotland who are just finding out about it and they're like congratulations on your new festival [laughs] and we've been doing it for six years. A lot of that might have been to do with the marketing reach of other platforms. The Fringe obviously, but even much smaller things that were still much bigger than us. Unfix was largely word of mouth up until this last time when we had a PR team and all that. I think where Unfix sits within a larger arts landscape, there's a slightly uncomfortable feeling that it's becoming easier because I think it's becoming more zeitgeisty as we go on because climate change isn't going away. There were other projects like the Dark Mountain project who were writers but more than ten years ahead of me, but in terms of a performance festival that has a focus on embodied things happening on stage or in other places, I guess we were the first to say let's make sure we're doing this about stuff that matters right now. You can't point at a more obvious culprit than climate change. Obviously, it's what I wanted to do but I did do this very broad offer and you know how climate exists up there in the sky, well it relates to capitalism, inequality, and how we're doing business or how we're not doing business, and whether we think there is a capacity to change course. Are we just locked into a swan dive now where humanity is going to become extinct because we didn't have any other ideas? You know the Mark Fisher book about asking whether ideas other than neoliberal capitalism are thinkable, are they just things to say but they can't be instantiated because of history and communism going wrong. Is this the only thing we can do even though it's killing all of us and we can see it? I think as things have become more politicised and awareness around ecological crisis has grown, Unfix has just been sitting there in the middle of it. Now that COP26 is coming to Glasgow in November, the big climate change thing is happening in the same city that we're doing the festival and some of that is by sitting around and refusing to go away. I think Unfix's position in the landscape has changed as it's gone on, but not entirely by our doing. The landscape shifts and if you just stick to your post like a dog with a bone, then it will look different six years on than it did at the start.

SG: What you were describing there was making me think of the title of one of Arika's episodes, I think it's *Other Worlds Already Exist*, which I've always loved as an optimistic frame for thinking about what performance is making possible, if only temporarily. I'm thinking about institutions which are based in Glasgow or between Glasgow and Edinburgh,

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and maybe Arika is another festival, or their format is what they call Episodes, where they are focussed on a particular set of issues but perhaps a slightly wider ranging number of issues than Unfix which is more tightly focussed.

PMH: I'm not sure if that last bit is true, but I am glad that you mentioned Arika. I didn't model Unfix on anything at all, I thought I can't believe this venue is going to let me do what I want. It was put together from a life lived and my reading and my experiences, but it wasn't like what else is around in Scotland and how should it be in relation to them. To me, it was fairly clear that there was something missing, and I just wanted to offer that.

However, if there was a model or if I could have that much integrity or that much staying power, it would be Arika. I've had a few really helpful chats with them in the background and they've been really supportive. For several reasons: through the political nature of what they're doing and the issue-driven thing, the experimental social format, and their capacity to change. They were an experimental music festival, which was amazing for as long as it lasted and then they drifted away from that and they've turned into this thing that from outside perspective at some of their events, you're asking is this even an arts festival anymore and does it matter, and I don't think it does. It feels vital in terms of talking about the problems around us. I think they're fantastic for all those reasons. The only thing I was bridling, was the range so far of the things we've been able to programme in Unfix and which I hope to continue broadening. One of the things I've tried to do, with a quite a few artists and particularly ones I've chased, they might not be making anything around ecological crisis or climate change on the face of it, but my job as a curator is to take work with their permission and I'll gently nudge artists to see the connections, so it's not as if it's just relentlessly a festival full of piece after piece about climate change. We've had relatively few pieces directly about climate change. It's almost like the job of the festival is to make those links in how it's curated and how it's presented, but the artists are free to make the work.

SG: So, it's work which sort of speaks to the broader issue or broader context of climate change without necessarily having to be about climate change.

PMH: Exactly. The first thing to pop into my head is last time, I chased someone who was making work around colonial reparations in slavery and climate change wasn't mentioned once, but to me there's the obvious unevenness of the impacts of climate change and the

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historical debts and the fact that the countries that contributed the least to it are going to suffer the worst from it and diasporic things around migration, all these things. So, absolutely, let's put on a piece that's about colonial reparations and without being overly didactic or leading, just let it echo against another piece that maybe happened the day before that was about climate change and let the links emerge. By juxtaposing different artists and then maybe having panel discussions, you hope that things will become more explicit, and you might ask that artist who wasn't explicitly making stuff about climate change, what do you think about this because you are heavily engaged in another equally important issue, don't you think it links? They might have thought about it for the first time and suddenly you've made a little spark there, so I think Unfix is actually quite broad. I hate to use the word marketing, but for marketing purposes it is ecology and ecological crisis and climate change plus festival. If we have to be known for something, then yes, we'll make it that, but under that umbrella there is room for everything.

SG: It's really interesting what you're describing there. I keep saying it's really interesting, but it is all really interesting!

PMH: [Laughs].

SG: The term ecology and the frame festival are true, but they are also strategic terms that make intelligible to funders and maybe intelligible to certain kinds of organisations, but also maybe to audiences.

PMH: Yes, definitely. It's the biggest thing I've ever done in terms of the most well-known thing, but it's also the thing I'm happiest with because it's borne out of something I completely believe in. When it comes time to position it and market it to funders or to audiences, I don't feel that I have to do this madmen pitch, I'll just talk about it. I'll maybe use slightly different language and different word count. If it's for a poster then we've got four words, if it's for a funding application we've got nine-hundred words, and if it's for our programme then I can write what I want, but it's all coming from the same place so I don't feel a dissonance, which really helps me and I think it's when I lose as well because everybody can tell when I'm lying and trying to convince them and with Unfix I'm not. If a funding bid is unsuccessful, I don't feel burned in the sense of turning yourself inside out to try and convince them and they didn't buy it, it's more like I told you what it was, and you

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didn't buy it. I still know what it is and it's still worth doing, so I can walk away with my head held high.

SG: Grand. That's a really lovely way of framing the encounter with funding bodies. Maybe that also reflects back on your approach to how you've framed the open call this year of thinking about the particular labour that's involved in moulding yourself to match a certain set of expectations which may or may not be clearly articulated.

PMH: I realised as I was saying that that it echoes what I try and apply in freeing artists up, because I never wanted to be sitting deciding people's fates anyway, it's horrible. You're going to have to reject the majority of applications, but we try not to send pro forma like 'we received a wonderful number of applications, however on this occasion'. We try not to send emails like that and just be people about it, but the reason those auto responses are generated from organisations is because it's true, way too many artists apply, and you only have the capacity that you've got.

SG: I'm also thinking about the commitment that you are making as an artist and as an organisation to the labour of that, that if you are going to respond with something other than a generic, even if very politely written letter, to respond to individual artists and explain why there wasn't a fit for them this time or why it didn't work out, that requires time and energy.

PMH: Absolutely, yes. It's something I keep getting pulled up on by producers and it's great because I need that feedback. I don't know if it's just my character, but I want to please people and be open, but if an artist wants a five-thousand-word essay on why they weren't selected, my instinct is to write them a five-thousand-word essay and that very quickly becomes unmanageable so it's a balancing act. I don't know if I should be saying this or not, but the festival is happening in June, we got the full funding we asked for and it's not even April yet and I think I've already done my own hours. Even for me personally to be paid industry standard rates for putting Unfix together, I would have to triple what I'm actually getting paid to even come close, but you're always judging the ask to the funders and what there's any chance in hell they'll actually give you, so you chop things off it because you know you'll get a no. I don't know if other festivals are the same, but if we were going to ask for what we needed, it would be three times what we've asked for but we're not asking for that because you didn't give us half of what that sum was last time. It's guesswork and

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that's where I really lean on producers. For instance, Feral were great last time about not deviating from what Unfix is about but putting the buzzwords in that the funders want to hear, while making sure that you haven't compromised the integrity of the thing just to get the money. You have to believe in the application.

SG: That sort of strategic relationship of thinking through the terms of your own practice in relation to a structure like Creative Scotland or like Arts Council England. It's interesting to me that the Feral team came alongside or through the Arches and there's a really intense knowledge and history there that they're drawing on.

PMH: Yes, I'll never know but that might have had a bearing on us getting the half funding that we got last time. I can only imagine it won't have hurt when the panels on Creative Scotland know Feral and the legacy of the Arches. I remember the first applications I ever did to Creative Scotland. I didn't understand how any of it worked, I mean I still don't, but I didn't understand that you're allowed to talk to them for instance. They don't make that clear on their website. I thought that would be unethical. You can go and have a coffee with a Creative Scotland officer, and I didn't know any of that stuff. The first rejections were around not having the track record and even at that point I thought I've been making stuff for fifteen years. The penny finally dropped that they meant that you don't have the track record of being funded by us, which is massively problematic because it means that if you've had money before you can have some more and if you haven't, we're not going to let you in. I'll never know to what extent, but I feel like by associating myself with people who do have the track record in their eyes, I've come to have a bit of a track record myself. I feel like now if I put in an application, they might say oh it's that guy, he's come good on our funding in the past. None of which strikes me as entirely fair.

SG: There's something really striking about the intelligibility or the accessibility of that other funding process where something as simple as the possibility of talking to a funding officer or talking to a live art specialist, that that possibility is not made it clear. It's not an invitation.

PMH: I even remember the other nuances of it. The last big piece that I did was called Shrimp Dance and I've been thinking about doing that for ten years and now it's finally done and then coronavirus came and we weren't able to tour it, so I hope it will have another life. The first time I applied to Creative Scotland to try and develop that about ten years ago, I

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got a no and I just thought oh okay, sorry and crawled back under my rock. I didn't know that you can address the feedback and reapply, which now is completely bog-standard. You might not get it the first time, but put it back in. I thought once they'd said no to you, you had to go away forever. I just didn't apply again for several more years.

SG: One of the last things to ask you about is, and this circles round and through a lot of what we've been talking about, this sense of the bigger infrastructure in which performance, whether it's called live art or not, becomes intelligible. Knowing that in Scotland as we've said there isn't a lead organisation with responsibility for live art in the same way that the Live Art Development Agency is positioned in England.

PMH: I did want to say one thing which is that, and again I'm only speaking from the perspective that I've bumbled through, I think from what you were saying both before the tape started rolling and now about the idea that England has the Live Art Development Agency and there isn't such a thing up here, I think I'd be slightly wary of that contrast. I know that certainly and again this is not necessarily meant as a criticism, so I hope it's alright, I have tried and failed utterly over the years to form a relationship with the Live Art Development Agency. They don't know who I am, and they're not interested in finding out. It might just be that they are stressed out their boxes and that might be why, but versus the smaller things up here that are already part of the furniture and they're already known to the Live Art Development Agency, so they make links with them quite easily it seems. It doesn't feel to me that there's a national thing in England and there's nothing up here. To me it feels quite UK wide in the sense that there are some well supported known quantities who make networks with each other. The obvious ones up in Scotland then have these relationships with LADA down south and that's how work circulates unless people find other ways to break through. If you can't get the attention of these key organisations, you are kind of screwed. In terms of funded, shiny platform work, you've got to go ahead and do it yourself. That's just how it felt to me. A lot of the people that I've worked with in England are not Live Art Development Agency-related and quite possibly they've failed to get in touch with them as well. I don't live in England, but it's certainly not my impression that if you're a live artist you know where to go and that there's a clear pathway for you because it depends on getting the ear of people and there's arts admin in there as well. It's kind of official cliques with unofficial cliques and if you can somehow get friendly with them then

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you might get some work to be super blunt about it. That's how it feels to me. Even universities incidentally get involved in that. There's cross-fermentation between everyone in a university department who is in a power position and what links do they make and with which of the local organisations. I think it all goes round in a very unexamined way. I don't know how it can be cleaned up, but it's not clean.

SG: Maybe it's not for me to frame LADA as the lead organisation in England. As you rightly point out, Arts Admin and the development support agencies are doing that work and maybe what that speaks to is the disconnect between the profile of organisations like LADA and what they're actually funded to do by Arts Council England.

PMH: Yes, quite possibly. This doesn't relate to any particular question, but I suppose I wanted to say it at some point. To go back to your very first question of how I got into this, the template for me was, for all of the problems and demographics that the punk rock, DIY scene might have catered to, and that was completely unregulated and there will be all sorts of biases and that's obviously a negative, but I think the positive was that there was definitely no idea that you go to university to be taught how to make radical or challenging art. It is a source of ongoing bafflement to me. I think there is what I thought live art was when I first encountered it and then there's how it's practiced, and to me they are not the same thing because the majority of it comes from artists who were trained to do it. To the point where sometimes I'm three minutes into watching someone's work and I know what course they did and what module they got that bit from. As an old punk rocker that's kind of an anathema, you shouldn't be doing what your teacher told you to do, I don't see what's radical about that. Particularly when I'm now as a way to survive, even though I'm enormously grateful and enjoying it, I'm doing a PhD at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and I can't get over the 'royal' word at the start. I logged onto their twitter when I was starting the PhD and the first thing I saw was a photo of Prince Charles shaking someone's hand. I'm like is this the home, really? I do have the current emperor's clothes feeling about live art in some ways, it's not the thing that it says it is. That's not to say that it also isn't sometimes absolutely the thing that it says it is, but I just don't think by calling yourself a particular genre that you then become the cool kids who are provoking change. Very often, you're just perpetuating things within a particular aesthetic. A bit acerbic!

SG: No, that's perfect.