

## Live Art in Scotland: Sian Baxter

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Stephen Greer (SG): I've been starting these conversations over the past few weeks in sort of the same way to see if works in different contexts. I've been inviting people to think about their first encounters with performance, with live art, or any kind of performance actually whether it was seeing it or studying it. I think origin stories are a little bit suspect, but I do like the idea of first impressions or strong memories so maybe we can start there. What was your route into this field?

Sian Baxter (SB): My origin story is actually quite clear to me. There are a set of events that I remember very clearly. I went to the University of Sheffield to study theatre and performance and they had a really amazing tutor there called Rachel Zerihan who writes a lot about one-to-one work among many other things. I went to university having only been exposed to more traditional types of theatre and performance. I grew up in Scunthorpe and I was from a working-class family and I'd never been in a gallery space or any other non-traditional performance space. I got to university and in my first year, I'm not sure there was a full module but Rachel did a few lectures on live art and she introduced artists like Ron Athey, Bobby Baker, Tehching Hsieh and Oreet Ashery. I became obsessed immediately and I tried to find the thing called live art in Sheffield and I couldn't see where any of it was going on and so I asked for a meeting with her in her office and I was like what is thing called live art and where can I see it? There wasn't much happening in Sheffield at the time and she told me about BUZZCUT. I think she'd been to the first year of BUZZCUT and the

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second year was coming up in a few months' time in Glasgow. I hopped on a megabus by myself and got put up by my friend who was at university here and went to BUZZCUT in Mono and that was the first time I'd seen any live art. At university, a lot of the modules weren't looking at live art. It was quite traditional, Greek theatre and so I would go into the library and find books on live art. I remember I had this little notebook and I'd try and learn about an artist a day for a bit. I'd write down notes and became obsessed. It immediately took over.

SG: What do you remember of that first BUZZCUT? It was at Mono so a very specific set of venues and spaces, moved to The Pearce Institute and then the CCA in later years. What do you remember of that first year? Do you remember anyone's work in particular?

SB: I remember Thomas John Bacon's work. I can't remember what the piece was called, but I remember it was quite an extreme body based work with lots of blood and lots of intense noise. I think it was in an old hairdresser's. I remember that. I don't remember much about that first year, I think I felt quite shy. I met some nice people there, but I mostly kept to myself and bopped around. His work is one that I remember because it was so intense and I'd never seen anything like that before and I think that's what I expected all live art to be in a way. I'd been studying Ron Athey and I became quite fascinated with his work. I remember that one. I think it's later BUZZCUTs that I start to remember the actual works. It was the first time that I'd been in a festival context that wasn't the Fringe. BUZZCUT in its second year, there were still quite a lot of people and too many people for Mono really. I remember the sense of being quite excited by being surrounded by all of these people. I didn't know which ones were the artists and which ones were the producers and the critics. I remember it feeling new and exciting.

SG: You mentioned the Fringe there, had you been going to the Fringe or had you started going around that time as well?

SB: I went to the Fringe when I was eighteen with a youth theatre company from Scunthorpe. We took a show there and that was the first time I'd been to the Fringe and that was the first time I'd been to a performance festival. Even then, I was seeking work that was a bit different, but not quite finding it. The Fringe is so commercial. There's always experimental work going on there but I think you have to know about it or know what to look for, but I had no idea at that age.

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SG: I guess it's also the scale of the festival as you say, unless you know what you're looking for, the chances of you discovering it by accident is perhaps quite small.

SB: Totally, and with a youth group as well.

SG: So after coming up to BUZZCUT, were you imagining working in this field or were you like this is the work I'm going to be a fan of. I'm just going to go to this work all the time.

SB: Yes, I think I was pretty set from then that I was going to do something. I wasn't sure what and I thought the last thing I'll ever want to be is a producer.

SG: [Laughs] Why not?

SB: I still have this love-hate relationship with producing, but I think because I still didn't understand what producing was at that point. My exposure to what a producer was was with the University theatre company in Sheffield. When we'd put on shows there would always be a director, a producer, and a stage manager. The producer would always be the one trying to get a deal off a local restaurant so we could all have our post-show meal there and get some money back, to sponsor us basically. I hated that. Talks around money and asking people for things, which you know, is part of a producer's role, but it made me feel really uncomfortable. For a while I saw that as the only thing that producers did.

SG: When did that view of the work, or the possibilities of the work start to change? Was it when you started working with Artsadmin or prior to that?

SB: It was just before. Because there wasn't much going on in Sheffield in terms of experimental work, obviously Forced Entertainment are based in Sheffield, but they're very international. There is Third Angel theatre company as well. There were a few companies but not many showings or spaces. When I was in my second year of university, I set up a more experimental theatre company with two friends who were in their third year called The Bare Project, they're actually still running. I don't work with them anymore because I moved to London and went down the live art route. We started off as an immersive theatre company and tried to find our voice and what we were doing. There wasn't much going on in Sheffield and we decided to try and change that and so set up a company and would put on works in places in Sheffield. I can't remember what we said my role was, but it wasn't the word producer. As time went on and the more work we were doing together, we got our first bit of funding, and we went to the Fringe. I was still performing in the company as

well at the time. We went to the Fringe just before my third year. We'd put on scratch nights in Sheffield and I was running those events and then we got our first pot of funding. The day that I graduated, we found out from Arts Council that we'd got funding to do this big, site-specific project in an old Woolworths. As time went on, I was the producer and I was just refusing to be called that. Max, who was the director of the company was like you're the producer and I was like no I'm not. Then we got this funding and I was like fine, I'm the producer. That's when I started to understand that what I'd been doing the whole time was producing. I think especially when I saw the job description go out for the traineeship at Artsadmin and it had person specification and experience and I ticked every single box and thought okay, yes, I'm definitely a producer.

SG: A slightly reluctant recognition of yes, that's me. That's what I do. Maybe we'll get into the detail of what it is that you do. You went into the Artsadmin traineeship through which I guess you worked with a number of different artists who were connected to Artsadmin. What was that experience like? Who were you working with during that time?

SB: I can't remember everyone that I worked with now. I worked with Martin O'Brien on one of his performances.

SG: Was it one of the zombie pieces?

SB: Yes, *If It Were The Apocalypse I'd Eat You To Stay Alive*, which was brilliant. I worked with Chris Dobrowski. I don't really know how to explain his work. What project was it? His *Antarctica* piece about his trip to Antarctica. It was much more autobiographical. He made loads of methods of transport, I think, at one point. Cat Harrison was producing that, and I assisted her. There was the 2 Degrees Festival which they have every other year at Artsadmin. That's their environmental festival. There were lots of one-off events as well. There was quite a lot going on at that time there, but I really loved that experience of working with them. Everything that I'd been doing up to that point had been quite DIY and felt quite unofficial. I guess that was my first job where I was like oh, this is a professional thing and I see that this is a job that people can do as adults [laughs] and get paid for it in an organisational capacity. It was quite fascinating to see the structure behind the organisation. It's seen as quite a small office, but I thought there were loads of people in there compared to the three-person theatre company that I'd been working in.

SG: I'm interested in, as I think I maybe said in the email, these little ecologies of practice and thinking about who is informing our work or travelling alongside us. I'm interested in that aspect of it, of other people who were in that sphere as producers or in other kinds of creative or production roles that you were seeing coming along with you, or whose work was feeding yours.

SB: Yes, I think with Karl Taylor, Karl did the traineeship the year before me and moved to Glasgow the year before me and I think got a job at Take Me Somewhere the year before me and was involved in BUZZCUT and stuff. I think I always see myself and Karl, we've taken very similar routes. I see Karl as someone like that. I think people at Artsadmin like Mary Osborn and Cat Harrison, their work as producers has definitely fed into mine. I think that's also because they were super supportive of me being a new producer at the time. I was thinking about this question a bit and I think that it's hard to say certain people because I really feel like most artists that I've met and performances that I've seen or festivals that I've gone to, have in some way informed what I do. Some of that is possibly more obvious than others. Maybe Rosana Cade's work has informed what I do quite a bit because Rachel told me about Rosana's work at university, obviously I went to BUZZCUT that they set up, and then I've worked in a producing capacity with them and a production management assistant capacity and they're a really close friend. I've lived with them and I hang out with them regularly. They're outwardly and loudly queer and I was seeing and learning about their work whilst realising those things about myself. As well as having an impact personally, seeing Rosana make that work and tour it and being a part of that has had a massive influence on my practice as a producer as well because that's what I want to continue to support, artists making radical or queer work, or telling stories that really need to be told.

SG: That's really lovely. I'm thinking about when you work with different artists, is there an approach which always travels with you, or does it feel like the kind of work that you do or the approach that you take changes depending on the particular artist or the project or depending on the context? Maybe it's a mix of both. Is there an outlook that you feel like you have that travels with you from project to project?

SB: Yes, I think the approach has to be different each time because each individual artists has different ideas of what a producer is and different access needs for example. I find that with more established artists, what I mean by that are artists that I've been working with for

longer, I feel like it's maybe an easier lead in and projects can naturally just get going. With newer artists or artists who aren't as experienced with producers, it's a lot more stopping and starting until you find your own balance and what is expected of each other. I think I always try to commit it from a generous, generosity and humour are my two rules of working with people and hopefully of people working with me as well. I think it does depend artist to artist. Some I feel like I have to get really involved with, not have to but that's part of our collaboration, and some people it's much more hands-off.

SG: Okay. I'm guessing that then also changes a bit if you're working in a festival context or whether you're working with an artist in support of touring work.

SB: Yes, for sure. It depends which side of the festival. If I'm working as part of the festival team or as an independent producer for a performance, if it's a live art festival I will probably have two shows going on. That usually ends up being the case because there aren't that many of them happening over the UK or Scotland, so we all flock to the same places. With touring as well, when I first started touring, Nick Cassenbaum was the first artist that I started to work with as a freelancing producer. I finished work at Artsadmin. They kept me on for another half a year after the traineeship and then they were like okay, we really have to let you go now, we have to get another trainee in. So, I started working with Nick and quite quickly got a first tour with Bubble Schmeisis which is his storytelling show about coming to terms with his Jewish identity through being washed by old men. That first tour and the second tour of that as well, I was very much like I'm coming to every single show. That was the pay-off for all of the work that we'd put in, but as I've got more experienced and busier and I guess I've aged, I'm only twenty-eight but I haven't got the energy I used to, and I can't do that anymore. Unfortunately, I can't go to every single show that I produce.

SG: Is that because of a real balancing of energy, time, and care both for the work but also for yourself as a creative person?

SB: I think that's something that I'm still very much learning. As a producer, a lot of what I do is, and I can only speak for myself, linked to care for the artist or the team that I'm working with. I have in the past forgotten that that includes myself because there is this view that the producer always knows what they're doing and they're there to fix things and sort everyone out. What happens if the producer is having a meltdown, that's kind of not

expected within a creative team. I think those first few years of producing it was just excitement and I was doing something that I really enjoyed and I had a lot of expectation and the burnout was huge after big tours and then trying to write more funding applications having just come off the back of a tour. It was just too much.

SG: I'm aware that one of the really tricky things about that dynamic, and maybe I'm speaking about myself, is that feeling of being the problem-solver and of being on top of things can feel really nice [laughs]. It feels great that you're that person and that people turn to you and that you can pull it out of the bag. You're the person that's like 'right, leave it with me and I'll make it happen' and it's because of all those things. That's one of the ways it's so hard when one is running oneself empty.

SB: Yes, for sure. Especially over the past two years and having to slow down because of this pandemic, I think I've learned a lot about expectations versus reality of producing. I'm trying to keep this idea of planning for care of others and self-care within a structured approach to making a show. I work with Mele Broomes and what she does with every single show that she makes, I'm not sure how long she's been doing this for, she has a care budget for any person of colour in her team. They get X amount of money and they don't have to say what they've spent it on, but it's towards their care. I think this is really brilliant and something that I feel inspired by and would like to integrate into budgets with artists that I work with for creative teams.

SG: I think I have heard about that idea. I don't know if I heard about it in reference to Mele's practice. I'm also thinking here, knowing that you worked with a few artists who have explicit care and support needs and who are probably at this stage in their careers very conscious and articulate in interrogating them and making them clear to the people or the institutions they work with.

SB: Yes. I worked with the vacuum cleaner as well coming straight out of Artsadmin until I moved to Glasgow and his approach to access and care is really brilliant. I had seen an access document until I'd worked with him and now, thankfully that's becoming more of a common thing but back then it wasn't so common and I remember feeling really inspired by this document that he'd created that he would send round to venues and organisations. I guess things like that, those experiences with artists, have definitely fed into the way that I work now.

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SG: It also feels like, and it is really recently maybe in the last five or ten years, maybe because of artists pushing and being clear about their needs and also producers and other people being clear, that organisations are more receptive and are being more proactive. I try not to fly the flag for the Scottish scene knowing that it has its own problems and difficult dynamics, but BUZZCUT's emphasis on access from its early days felt really significant to me and the way in which that's become embedded in what Take Me Somewhere does as well, partly because of the overlap of the people involved.

SB: Yes, definitely. I remember that BUZZCUT, I'm not sure if it was the fourth but basically after that BUZZCUT that I went to, I came back every year to volunteer until I moved to Glasgow. I remember the BUZZCUT where they'd got all the access funding and just how amazing that was, but also how of course interpreters should be here and people should be able to get up to the second floor to watch a one-to-one performance that's taking place in a tiny room. Why is this only happening now? But yes, I agree, BUZZCUT has influenced the live art scene in the UK for sure.

SG: The other thing I was interested in maybe talking to you about is that wider landscape. I know that your work is often based in Scotland, but you're working across the UK partly because of the touring nature of things. I guess I'm interested in your sense of that ecology of live art in Scotland and where the spaces and places of possibility for it are.

SB: Yes, I think with touring work I often find that I end up not doing much touring in Scotland. A lot of it is concentrated in the south of England and that's something that I'm really trying to change and have been for a while. I produced Lucy Hutson's Bi-Curious George and Other Side Kicks that she made with her dad. We put that on at Platform.

SG: In Easterhouse.

SB: I think that was about two years ago and I think that was the first piece of work that I'd actually produced that had been shown in Glasgow after being here for about four or five years. I do find that, and I don't know if it's because I'm from England and I established some relationships with venues down there. I didn't have that in Scotland or in Glasgow, so it would make sense that a lot of the work at first that I worked on was that side of the border. I do still find it difficult to find venues in Scotland to take on more experimental work at a small to mid-scale level. That's not to say there isn't anything, but I think it's quite



stretched. It was funny thinking about this question, I was like I can't remember going to see work before this pandemic, but Tramway which is more for international or larger scale pieces and more dance or movement-based works usually, and then Take Me Somewhere once a year. I know I work with Take Me Somewhere, but I think the work shown with them is just incredible and next level. I've lived in Glasgow for four years I think, and I still feel like I haven't figured out the scene here properly. I don't know if that's a me thing or a city thing. Does that make sense?

SG: Yes, that makes sense. I feel like part of the dynamic is, and this is where I'm getting this weird double-perspective of having lived in Scotland and in Glasgow for a while and then doing all this historical work and becoming really sensitive to waves of activity and sometimes it's to do with the calendar year so around festival seasons, and sometimes it's institutions which grow up and are hugely successful and then either close or move into a different stage of their life cycle. As you know, BUZZCUT shifts from festivals to the Double Thrills model as well as their artist development work which has a different rhythm to it and a different visibility to it as well.

SB: Yes, BUZZCUT Double Thrills is my pre-pandemic, bi-monthly viewing of some local and international work. I always really look forward to those. It feels like we don't have anything else like that. I moved to Glasgow after The Arches closed down, but the first time I visited The Arches was the day they found out they were closing because I was at, was it Homotopia festival there?

SG: It was Behaviour, and was it Dark Behaviour because it was the queer clubnight?

SB: Yes. I came down for that and it was the day that they found out that they were closing, so that was the only day that I'd been there. I came to Glasgow at a time where people were really mourning the loss of that and feeling quite stuck and not sure what to do next, I think was the sense I was getting from a lot of the artists.

SG: That was my experience of that moment as well, people going well, what next. I think that was attached to the loss of a physical space, but also what felt like the loss of a community as well. It's taken a while to reshape itself, but the where of where that community shape is found is a tricky one.

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SB: We still don't have that. Take Me Somewhere was born out of the closing of The Arches, but that's a festival once a year. They do artist development stuff across the year, but Tramway host them. I feel like there isn't a building and National Theatre Scotland do support some makers as well, but they don't have a building. I feel like it is a lot of travelling to a place for a day. Maybe that's not what I mean, but it feels like there's no base. I don't know where to situate myself sometimes.

SG: I was going to ask about the extended scene. Forest Fringe sort of stopped doing Edinburgh festivals, I'm just thinking about the period where you started to enter professional practice and whether that's part of your ecology as a live art person.

SB: Yes, I forgot about Forest Fringe. After I started volunteering at BUZZCUT, I also started volunteering at Forest Fringe. I volunteered for them for maybe two or three years. I loved that place. Every summer going to The Out of the Blue Drill Hall.

SG: The Out of the Blue Drill Hall down in Leith.

SB: Yes, and that's where I first met Karl Taylor, where I first met loads of people. I saw Louise Orwin.

SG: Was it *A Girl & A Gun*? Was that the show that was touring then or something else?

SB: Yes, no, it was *Pretty Ugly*. I remember seeing that and Selena Thompson's *Race Cards*. So many good things. That felt like a really nice safe haven of people and great work. Thinking about what kind of contexts I feel more connected to or at home in, for me it's definitely festival contexts. I've always wanted to work in festivals and I think it's because of those temporary communities that are built and the unsustainable buzz that's created and all of the different works that you see in a day and chat about. I've always erred on the edge of extremeness and I think that's why I first got into live art, finding out about these risky experimental things that people do to get certain points across or conversations started. I've worked with quite a few durational works like Amy Rosa, who won the Adrian Howell award, who is also someone that I studied at university. I produced that piece for Take Me Somewhere and that was like a year-long durational piece where she froze two litres a day and meditated over it in the chapel for the Take Me Somewhere. I've been working on Hannah Tuulikki's *Deer Dancer* which is an eight-hour long livestream. It would be live if it

could be. I'm working with Martin O'Brien on his zombie stuff and I think unsustainable extremeness excites me and I think that's why I really love working in festivals.

SG: Great. That's a really nice place to stop, that's really lovely. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about before I make an editorial decision? [Laughs] I'm trying not to have these conversations with an ear for 'that's really thematically satisfying to stop there', but I really like that. That's really gorgeous. *There Is A Silence*, that's what it was called, Amy's piece. I'd forgotten its name.

SB: Yes, *There Is A Silence*. I can't remember all the works anymore. I think when thinking about live art and being from a working-class background, I think that's something that feels quite important to me to cover just because for a long time, I felt like I didn't belong in this scene and like I wasn't clever enough, educated enough, or middle-class enough. When I came to BUZZCUT that first time, that was kind of my first introduction to seeing all different types of people in the same space watching live art. I think I originally tried watching live art from a really academic viewpoint and that doesn't work for me. I'd get really frustrated at why I couldn't understand something and think that I wasn't intelligent enough for it. It wasn't until realising that I might not always understand a piece of work but what's important to me now is how it makes me feel. I think what I really love about working in live art is creating experiences that make you feel a little bit changed afterwards in whatever way that might be and so that's the projects that I like to try and produce.