

Live Art in Scotland: Greg Sinclair

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Stephen Greer (SG): I was interested in asking you about your first encounters with performance and your first encounters with performance art or live art, whether you knew it at the time or in retrospect. I'm really wary of the neatness of an origin story but I'm interested in first encounters or first impressions.

Greg Sinclair (GS): It's a really interesting one this because I was trying to think, when you sent that question or thought over, what is my first encounter with live art? And I don't think I know because probably, as you say, it was an encounter without me realising that what I was seeing was live art. I'm sure that I must have seen things from quite a young age. My parents were really good, my mum especially, at taking me to see all sorts of different theatre projects and live music and sometimes it would be a bit of a gamble about what that was. Probably somewhere in there, there was something a bit more experimental. I had this weird memory, it's not strictly live art but it stuck with me. In Edinburgh when the Fringe is on there used to be a thing called Fringe Sunday which I think was the first Sunday of the three weeks of the Fringe. It would be a big open-air showcase with people giving you flyers, people doing little excerpts of the show, and busking. I've got this really vivid memory; I must've been about ten and there was a group of artists who were handing out flyers to their show but the way that they were doing it was this kind of tableau vivant. They'd all frozen and they were really good at it. I remember staring at it for hours and thinking wow, that's incredible. It had such a profound effect on me that at school I'd get my friends to

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stand on the street outside our school and pretend that we were like them and that we'd frozen. People would be walking past and were like what are doing? That wasn't their performance, but that trope was this very vivid memory of what could constitute as art. So maybe something like that.

SG: [Laughs]. That's really lovely. Yes, Fringe Sunday was that day of free performance. I think it ended like so many things end. They said, oh it's not on this year but it'll be back next year and then it never came back.

GS: What was great about it as I remember it, was that it was something that the local people really got involved in. It felt like it was their day to go and see things. I'm sure it was swarming with tourists as well, but it did feel like a community day out which was nice. I was thinking as well in more depth. My older brother, you might know him actually, is Liam Sinclair whose now at Dundee Rep and Scottish Dance Theatre, but he was the first year of contemporary theatre practice at the RSMD as it was then. He's two years older than me so I remember going along to see his shows that he was making, and his classmates were making, and I guess that was probably a real encounter of ah, this can be a thing. Two years behind, I started my music degree and I think what Liam was going through and what Liam was studying, and I went along to the NRLA and things like that, and I think that opened up my eyes in terms of the kind of composition. Then I started to get interested in experimental music, particularly things like Fluxus and Dada were where the boundary between composition and music and live art starts to get really blurry. I was really interested in that when I was studying and I think that's had a profound effect on everything I've done afterwards.

SG: Was that actively introduced into your programme of study or was that something that you were seeing at the NRLA and you were bringing back to that formal study?

GS: No, I mean it was University of Glasgow and at the time, on the Bachelor of Music degree, I wouldn't say that they actively kind of pushed me into exploring contemporary [music] performance. We did do a lot of study of twentieth century stuff so that's where I started to learn about Fluxus and a lot of the Modernist composers, John Cage and all of that kind of stuff. I think what's great about all of that is that once you get into it, you know experimental scores, then you see a transference of something which is part of my performance practice like creating performance scores. All of that comes from my learning

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and my interest in alternative music scoring. My route into NRLA was always by default through my brother rather than through my own education.

SG: Okay. I'm guessing that would have been at The Arches or at Tramway?

GS: Yes, I'm trying to think of the first year that I went. I think maybe it was at Tramway and then of course it went back to The Arches. In those days, I remember being slightly shocked by a lot of the stuff at NRLA.

SG: I'm interested then in asking you about when you started making your own work both during your period of study and afterwards. What were some of your earliest projects? I'm conscious of things that you made maybe in relationship to The Arches and things like *I Do, Do I* maybe came a bit later on.

GS: The first performance that I made was part of Arches Live and it was in 2009. I made a piece called *Anmut*, which was a duet between myself and another performer. At that stage I was definitely like okay, I'm interested in taking my work on to a stage but it felt like it had to have its roots very firmly in music so it was a composition. I composed this two-part vocal piece, which was all about the process that the body goes through in preparation to sing. All of the text of the piece, which is just projected it's not spoken, is all about what is going on in the breathing, the body, the spine, what's going on in your brain. I also feel like quite quickly I started pushing the boundary of how much I had to have my foot in music. If it's not jumping ahead too much, I now feel like I've shaken all of the shackles off a little bit. I feel like I now don't worry if my piece is not firmly rooted in music. What feels important now is that I find the right way to express it that's right for that project and not any kind of preconceived ideas about who's allowed to make work in certain ways.

SG: That sense of firm roots, how do you think that was manifesting? I'm thinking a little bit about some of the devices in some of your early works. There is a piece where you have a series of metronomes, is it *You Are Infinite Contraction*? When you talk about a sense of form of formality, is it about the literal mechanisms of a particular kind of composition or strategy, or something else in the work that you realised you could let go of?

GS: Yes, I think it was probably even a line that I used on my website for a long time that all of my projects started from a musical idea and I think with something like *You Are Infinite Contraction*, that probably was something that I was still thinking. The musical idea there

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was an exploration of rhythmic repetition, of duration, but that piece is also a collaboration with a visual artist who works in performance. Her influence was just as powerful, you know thinking, what is the design of this, what's the aesthetic of this? What is the process of the body in this? Catherine [Street] has done quite a lot of work about putting her body under extremes, you know filming herself doing actions to the point of exhaustion, which we spoke about with *You Are Infinite Contraction* and it probably could've become a durational piece, but what it was, was this fifteen-minute, very short, condensed idea. I'm not totally sure how we arrived at that, but we had spoken about it.

SG: Was that Catherine Street?

GS: Yes.

SG: Okay. That would've been in the early years of BUZZCUT?

GS: Yes, I think it was the second or third year of BUZZCUT and we performed that in what was like a disused shop front quite near Mono. I'm trying to remember what street it was on, but it was definitely before they got to The Pearce Institute where things were still a little bit scattered around the place and we were in this abandoned shop. What was funny with that piece, we performed barefoot and the floor was already covered in broken nails and holes in the floor, but the performance that was on before us had thrown eggs and sugar and flour around. Even though they tried to clean that up, our feet were sticking to this disgusting mess on the floor.

SG: Whenever I'm thinking about these conversations I'm taking notes in quite a boring chronological order and I'm trying to resist having chronological conversations but I'm guessing *I Do, Do I*, which is one of the Fluxus inspired pieces comes around this period. Is that one of the first ones where you're starting to work with children or younger people?

GS: No, it's not. I made a piece called *Ditto* which I wasn't in, which was definitely a composition thing. What I learned from *Ditto* was I was asking them to do things which classically trained performers don't often get asked to do such as to stand still for three minutes, or to turn on the spot as they're playing their solo. I was occasionally met with some resistance and I realised that maybe if I want to explore that aspect of [embodied composition], maybe I need to be in the work. *I Do, Do I* was interesting because process came about as a counterpoint to what I'd made before. I made a show called *Sonata for a*

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Man and a Boy where I performed alongside a ten-year-old boy, and he was the only child in that process and there were other adults in the room. And of course we listened to his ideas, but occasionally it felt like a room full of adults asking a child to do specific things so *I Do, Do I* was a how do I address that. I put myself into a school class and asked them to tell me what to do and then the idea of using Fluxus inspired instruction scores. I knew that those could work because it's an instruction, but it would also allow me to still exert my creative directing ability because they're also all about interpretation, so even if a child asks me to do an instruction, I can then twist that and shape that in a way that will work for the piece as a whole.

SG: I'm conscious that a number of pieces that you've made since then have been with children or with or for younger people and that you've worked a few times with Imagine. Has that strand of work been about carrying on that sense of a kind of collaboration where there is a structure being offered which you then have a chance to play with, or has it taken different forms?

GS: It's taken different forms. I think whether I'm making work for and with young people, I think I always kind of go into projects with a new approach to collaboration, or a new approach to process. I don't necessarily feel like I think that worked, let's take that into the next project. It's usually a reaction against what I've just done, but one thing that has sort of built up has all kind of stemmed from those discoveries from working on *Sonata* and all the difficulties of performing alongside a child. So *I Do, Do I* was like how can I collaborate with children but take out the difficulties of trying to tour a show when there are young people in it. Or, what if you just hear their voices and their creative input. Then I made a piece for Imagine called *As the Crow Flies*, a Livescore project and that was about, well if you can't travel with a cast of young people or if that's tricky, what about if they were in their own locations and they live stream into it. Of course that just opens up other difficulties [laughs]. Live streaming in performance is tricky.

SG: That's a piece made before the pandemic normalised the struggle.

GS: I know, it's so strange. It's weird, I've had a lot of time in the last year thinking about that project and about the fact that it probably has really helped me to know whatever I do next, that there are ways that you can work digitally. Not everybody needs to be in the same room as each other.

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SG: That was a project with some teenagers in Scotland and some in Belgium?

GS: Yes. The Livescore project was a yearlong project working across different places. We worked in different locations in Scotland: Argyll and Bute, the Isle of Coll, Edinburgh, and Glasgow. We also had Kopergieterij, a Ghent-based performance company as a partner so that's how the two teenagers from Ghent became involved. *As the Crow Flies* was the show at the end of this massive exploration where we worked with over one hundred young people and it was kind of like, how do we get all of those voices into the show. Of course we didn't get everybody but as well as the live streamed performance, there is also a video of the young people that we worked with in these different places.

SG: I'm interested in that project and the way it was able to engage with communities in different locations knowing that so much performance and theatre activity gets concentrated around the central belt and the cities in Scotland. Was that a conscious part of the design of the project, thinking okay this is an opportunity to go beyond some of the usual spaces and places or communities.

GS: It was partly that. It was also partly just about very specific funding things. Livescore was funded by a Creative Scotland initiative called Time To Shine, which was a fund specifically for artists to work with young people using digital means. As part of that, they had set up young people hubs in different locations. We worked directly with some of those hubs and because there was a hub in Argyll and Bute that's where we started working with children in Dunoon who then came into the show, and also the Isle of Coll. I also think it's quite important as you say, that that kind of work, especially more experimental processes, that you can't just see them in Edinburgh and Glasgow, or urban hubs.

SG: You mentioned in that project that it was a collaboration with, I've forgotten the artist, I beg your pardon. I'm interested in those patterns of collaboration as you move between different projects. I was reading a little bit about *Volcano*, with you working with Kate Temple and Ann Thallon. Maybe you could say a little bit about that project, but also that place of collaboration. Are there people that you've worked with repeatedly, or does each project invite a different sort of array of artists or other people that you're working with?

GS: Kate Temple is an artist that I've collaborated with a lot. Kate is primarily a visual artist but also works as a theatre designer. *Volcano* came about because Kate and I were working

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with Artlink in Edinburgh to deliver workshops for older adults with hearing loss. Actually, some of those workshops were the most kind of live art workshops that I've ever delivered, which was kind of amazing because you wouldn't necessarily have thought the participants would be interested in doing these really interesting performance scores.

SG: What kinds of things were you doing?

GS: A real mixture of things. My thing was always about let's generate performances based on instruction scores. Basically, let's generate sound from anything that we do. We were inspired by Nick Cave and his Soundsuits. We did follow a lot of Fluxus scores. I can't remember who this artist is but there's a Fluxus score [by Takehisa Kosugi titled *Chironomy 1*] which is basically just hold your hand out of the window for a long period of time. We were sitting with this group of seven or eight older people in this office all with their arms out the window and they just ran with it. I think that's what was so exciting for Kate and I. It was like oh, this is not something that they're embarrassed about or questioning, and that really fed our enquiry as well. We were like okay, well we can push this. What was brilliant is that Ann Thallon was one of those participants and Kate and I noticed from the word go that Ann was just up for everything. Kate and I started writing instruction scores and one of them was 'be a volcano', and Ann picked this one out of the hat and we didn't actually know what instruction she picked out and she just started running around the room and knocking tables over and screaming and we thought okay, it would be good to make a show called 'volcano' with Ann. It was a fantastic learning experience about how to collaborate in a way that's accessible for deaf audiences and for deaf collaborators. I learned quite a lot from that.

SG: Thinking about working with Ann as a deaf accessibility activist, a lot of the work that you're doing could get framed, or perhaps does get framed, within the domain of socially engaged practice and there's an overlap between live art and experimental performance and that domain. Do you feel like that plays into how funders or different organisations are choosing to support more experimental work? Is the frame of socially engaged practice, is that a doorway in if you like for live art?

GS: I guess if you're being cynical, it probably could be. I'm not meaning that you were being cynical, but that could be a cynical way for somebody to approach it. I think for me, I've always had this genuine interest in being socially engaged and that is almost like the thing

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that runs parallel with my own artistic ideas. When it comes to the point of looking for funding, or applying for funding, if that gets picked up and seen as a positive for my own work, then that is great, but I think it is just inherently there for me.

SG: One of the other sort of prompts I offered before we met today was your sense of the broader landscape of live art and experimental performance in Scotland but also further afield. A lot of your shows have toured around Scotland and I know you've taken work outside of Scotland as well. What's your sense of the landscape? I'm conscious that we have had a few sort of landmark organisations like The Arches, and that venues, physical spaces close. Obviously the National Review of Live Art had its day and then its host organisation closed as well. Since then, a number of other organisations have opened up almost in direct response. Places like BUZZCUT, but also Anatomy across in Edinburgh. So really it was just to invite your thoughts about that wider landscape. Do you feel like there is a wider landscape or is it not something as substantial as that?

GS: I guess it's hard to say. I think there could always be more. I think with any kind of art form that can be viewed as being underground then those artists need to be helped a little bit more. I think that's the role that organisations and venues such as the ones that you've mentioned, that can be something that they can help to provide. If you're a live artist in Scotland, it's possibly not as easy for you to get your work seen out with places like BUZZCUT or Anatomy. We've got the Edinburgh festivals.

SG: There's that hesitancy there that the Edinburgh festivals don't strike you as a natural fit or an obvious fit for this kind of work. We're both smiling because it's such a loaded question [laughs].

GS: Yes. I think I'm also hesitant because I'm like well what is, and this a bigger thing for me, live art in that context. As soon as you start trying to sell the work or if you take it out of a gallery context or a socially engaged, outdoor, public performance, as soon as you introduce money into that then I think you also start questioning a lot of that.

SG: I'm conscious of work which is, if it were being done anywhere but the Edinburgh Fringe, people would probably be quite comfortable calling it live art, but when it enters the particular economy of the Fringe, live art isn't a useful label or it's not a relevant label, or it's really tactical. I suppose I'm interested in your sense of what organisations or things like the

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Made in Scotland Showcase are doing who very consciously programme music, theatre, and dance. I think they're programming artists whose work cuts across all of those things, but they programme theatre, music, and dance.

GS: It's very interesting because I think artists that work in a kind of multi-disciplinary way, we get frustrated by those kinds of markers of genre. I think we also know how to play the system a little bit. For me, I know when to push the music angle of my work and I know when I need to big up a project as being theatre. It's interesting with Made in Scotland as well because I've applied a few times and not got it each of the times. I applied with *I Do, Do I* and *A Piece of You*. Maybe we should chat about that one because that is an interesting thing. I did get selected for Made in Scotland last year for the Showcase that never happened with my show *Lots and Not Lots*, which is theatre and also music because there's singing in it, but it's also performance art.

SG: I was interested in *A Piece of You*, I'm glad you brought it up because I couldn't think how to bring it up naturally [laughs]. It's a piece of intimate performance, it's a piece of performance for up to three people at a time and you're composing or performing a score which is unique to that audience, is that the idea?

GS: Yes, I ask the audience a series of set questions about themselves and when they give me the answers, I write them down using a kind of graphic score notation. It's full of colourful shapes and lines and drawings or words and I'm constantly showing the audience how I'm interpreting their answers. Then at the end I do, mostly improvised because of the time, a performance of that on my cello. Why I brought it up as being really interesting is when I first made it of course I understand that it's music, but I also have thought that maybe it's the most kind of live art piece which I have continued to do. I think because it's a piece of one-to-one performance, because it's very much rooted in this real situation, there's no fabrication. It's tell me about you and I will respond in this way. What's weird is that now that I'm doing it more and more, it's really interesting hearing how other people describe that and nobody thinks about it as being live art. It mostly gets thought of as being a music performance, which I'm fine about. Quite often it gets viewed as being a workshop because it's quite collaborative with the audience, which I guess I'm okay with as well. I think that's a really interesting thing in my practice. Because I kind of shirked genre labels and I'm really happy to kind of jump about between different art forms, it's really weird

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when somebody else reflects it back to you in a way that seems slightly different to how you view it.

SG: Have you been performing that as an online performance this year, or even prior to that?

GS: Yes, I hadn't been performing it online before lockdown but then in the last year it's been my main thing that I've been able to do, which has been great to be able to perform and really lovely to feel like any question marks that I had about what it is to be an artist that wants to tour their work internationally but at the same time is very conscious of their own carbon footprint because this work has not been compromised by going online. You know, the form of it is exactly the same, the way that I interact with the audience is more or less the same. I guess it feels different, but the process is the same so why would I need to go on a plane to somewhere else when we can just do it on zoom. That's been great to have that.

SG: I've been trying to think of these conversations both as snapshots of a particular person's career and what interests them, but I know they're also a snapshot of the present, of March 2021, at the end of a year of pandemic where a lot of our previous practices and habits have been forcibly thrown into the air. I suppose I'm interested in that sense of your practice not being compromised by the digital format. My impression of you there was that the experience of performing that work online this year over zoom, was an experience where you go okay, maybe I could be developing future works where I'll be able to perform them in this way and won't be compromised.

GS: Yes, definitely. I think prior to us going into lockdown I'd just finished some R&D on a new solo performance which was going to be very interactive with the audience. There was a lot of sharing objects, handing out costume things.

SG: Oh, this was *On and On and On and On and On* [working title], yes?

GS: Yes. I'd also done a work-in-progress at BUZZCUT Double Thrills and then of course, everything stopped and changed. Then I applied to do a weeklong residency at Band Space to re-approach that work and figure out how to keep working on the piece. Then the residency got cancelled, but it is postponed hopefully until June. I think that needs to be key for me if I don't want to just leave that piece behind and I want to try and get it out there. I

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think what's key for me is that I do pick up on my learning about digital work, community work, and just trying to be a bit smarter about where work is positioned both in the making process and in the presentation of it.

SG: I saw that work-in-progress or that early showing at BUZZCUT. I have no sense of time anymore because of the pandemic. Would that be the autumn of 2019 or the spring of 2020?

GS: It was December 2019.

SG: I remember speaking with someone, I can't remember who, possibly Karl at BUZZCUT saying that you'd also collaborated with a choreographer [Hannah Venet] on that piece. It's interesting to hear that the dance space is the space that might support the development of that work and so again, maybe there's another inter-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary thread that's come out of your practice. Did you think of yourself as a dancer up until this work, or of dance as part of the language of your work?

GS: It's become increasingly part of me. I would say because I've collaborated quite a lot in bands as a musician and a composer and in those processes, I've been quite happy to place myself within the warm-ups and the physical improvisations. From that, I started attending dance classes and going to improv workshops. There was this kind of hunger to really actively explore that as part of my artistic practice, especially with *On and On*, because the original route of the idea was based on the Strasbourg dancing plague from 1518 and wanting to explore thematically which has its routes in dance and movement. Also, as I said earlier on, I do feel as though I've started to let go of this feeling that because I'm not trained in dance that I can't create a piece where I'm dancing in it. But also, hopefully being smart enough to not go about that on my own, so bringing in Hannah Venet, who I've collaborated with a couple of times, as choreographer. Learning from others to support me and not just feeling around in the dark.