

Live Art in Scotland: Thulani Rachia

This interview was conducted online via Zoom on 15th June 2021 as part of the Live Art in Scotland research project at the University of Glasgow.

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Stephen Greer (SG): One of the things I was interested in and maybe we can just start there, is the interdisciplinary nature of your work. Knowing a little bit about your background in architecture, I'm interested in how that discipline or that background has come into conversation with performance and with visual art [in your work]. I don't know what your first encounters with performance were, or how you ended up working with performance as part of your practice, so maybe we can start there.

Thulani Rachia (TR): It's a long story which I'll try and summarise. I studied arts when I was in high school and we were learning about contemporary artists in South Africa who were working with performance, so people like Candice Breitz and Tracey Rose. They felt quite seminal and really responsive to South African politics and where the country was finding itself politically. They were responding to that in quite a bold and brave way, and they were artists that stood out to me. I had never really encountered performance outside of traditional and classical theatre. Here were these performers who were working off-site, outside of the theatre, creating this work that was situated and site-responsive and also in brilliant dialogue with where the country was. It was responding to multiple sites and the micro and macro conversations that the work was having. I just found it so invigorating and energising intellectually, but it also made me think about what I wanted my art to do, what I wanted it to respond to, and who it was for. These are questions that I wasn't really engaging with while I was in high school. It was about creating a product which is pretty and

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beautiful, which is also really important. I think beauty is an important element when creating art, but I hadn't really questioned or interrogated my own art in that way and encountering those performance works really made me think more about what my work was doing and its purpose. I went into doing architecture, I guess I was at a crossroads when I was leaving high school. It was between going into performance, that was more traditional acting theatre performance, and doing architecture. I ended up doing architecture. I think it was a love-hate relationship because I really enjoyed the process in architecture of site-analysis, of mapping a site and linking that to anthropological site-mapping, its history, understanding its programme, who uses the space, and the surrounding environments that feed into that site. I really enjoyed that and how that could feed the concept of the building and how the building concept could grow from that. Then when I came into the surveying, that's stuff I really enjoy. I guess that process of mapping sites has informed my work now. Those are processes that I still engage in, this idea of mapping a site and understanding what's needed, what exists, and how performance can maybe fill in a space or make something that already exists sing, or highlight, or interrogate. I guess in terms of architecture and its presence in my practice, it's still very much present. It was my first training so that's how I see the world, through the built environment. In many ways, that's how I understand the world. I think the way that architecture interrogates and questions a process of creating something is something that I still hold onto and a way that I still work in my own work.

SG: I think I read in an interview you talking about the phenomenology of architecture and a theorist, I want to say their name is Juhani.. ?

TR: Ah, Juhani Pallasmaa.

SG: Yes.

TR: Gosh, yes phenomenology. I think when you go into academia, whatever field it's in, a lot of the time, or at least for me there was an experience of learning about different theories and practices, but I feel like I was already encountering them in some way. Going into academia maybe just provided a word for an idea, so this idea of phenomenology is very much linked to a tactile experience of space. It's like a sensory experience of space. Christian Norberg-Schulz, who is also an architect and theorist, speaks about the genius loci. He didn't coin the phrase, but he works a lot with the idea that a place has a spirit. He talks

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about how the first stage of architecture when working on sites is trying to come into contact with that spirit in some way through mapping or understanding what that spirit is through doing site mappings. In my own culture, where I'm from in southern Africa, the spirit of a place is something that Nguni culture believes in. I think when I first encountered that in architecture it just felt like a lot of things were connecting, which I didn't expect to happen. Genius loci is something that I feel like I continue to work with in many different ways, maybe less direct ways, but wherever I'm working, whether it's in a gallery or an outdoor site, it's always trying to understand what the space needs.

SG: I'm really interested in that idea of a process of mapping and the different articulations it might have taken in your work. I'm conscious of a few different projects, but I was interested in some of your video work and the process of being a filmmaker, which is itself a process of mapping which then becomes part of an installation work perhaps. Is that a conscious methodology for you?

TR: Yes, I think video work has been such an interesting road for me in terms of integrating that into my practice. When I was speaking earlier about Candice Breitz and Tracey Rose, these are the female South African artists who I encountered when I was younger, and they were working with video as a form of self-documentation. I was really interested in that. I felt like they were almost inserting themselves into the canon because performance is a very ephemeral artform and it's easy for things to be erased and so it felt really interesting to me that they had integrated video as a way to document themselves in contemporary work. Particularly Tracey Rose. There's a piece that she performed called *Span II*, I think. Span means labour in Afrikaans. It was a performance installation and she had installed herself in a space. She was sitting nude on top of a monitor which had an image of a reclining nude, a romantic image, and she had shaved off her hair and she was almost threading her hair into this object. The work was a lot about labour. She comes from a working class and very religious background, so she was questioning a lot of things in the piece. I think it was performed in a prison. This idea of a performance being installed somewhere and being site responsive, I encountered those ideas first through her work. The idea that a performance can be installed in a space or as part of an installation and can be the work that you go and experience outside of a theatre context. I think within my own work, in the last performances that I've made I've definitely been trying to interrogate those

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ideas further in having video work as a documentation of something and working alongside a performance and actually, for me at least, understanding that there isn't necessarily a hierarchy between those two things. They are both feeding valuable information which is integral in understanding the piece of work. The action that I'm doing as the performer is feeding into the making of the video and vice versa. I think thinking with those ideas, the idea of installing performance, comes from those seminal works.

SG: So, you have the sense of the performed action and the live action and the video work both contextualising each other.

TR: Yes.

SG: I don't know Tracey's work very well, but I have an image and I want to say that one of the *Span* works was done inside a glass cabinet?

TR: Yes.

SG: Hearing you describe that process and those dynamics in the work, I know that the project that you did at Civic Room or at least as I understand it, part of it was responding to the space of Civic Room as much as it was about engaging with Glasgow's colonial architecture. That feels like another articulation, another layer of this site-responsiveness that you've been describing.

TR: Yes. The Civic Room project was interesting because on a macro scale it's situated in Scotland, in Glasgow, in a city which I think more recently is coming to terms with that history or its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. I think it's being interrogated in some ways. After arriving, maybe seven years ago, I started to learn more about that history and Glasgow's relationship to it. I was shocked that there was no built space where you could access that history, such as a museum where you can go in and learn about the history, when it's built so much of Glasgow's wealth. I was always confused about that and wanted to understand why that was. I had the opportunity to show some of that research or that thinking that I'd been doing for a number of years at Civic Room in a place which is implicated in that history. The Civic Room was a lint mill and historically, a lot of merchants and people who were very wealthy used the space. It's really interesting because you walk into that space and it's falling apart, there are parts of it that are quite precarious, and so in terms of responding to the space, I wanted the video work to allow people to question the

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space they were in and to bring attention to that space as well. I created video documentary of a site being demolished down the road in the area which was opposite the City Chambers. I was interested in this idea of erasure and how much of the built fabric which signifies this history was being erased. What was replacing that space was a boutique hotel and there was this idea of urban renewal erasing the past or the signifiers of that past. I wanted to hold onto it in some way and I felt like documenting that erasure was a way of doing that. Behind the site is the City Chambers which is a monolithic, strong building which looks like it is not going anywhere in the near future but is also implicated in this history because it's one of the most expensive buildings in Glasgow. The money to build that building came from wealth accumulated during the transatlantic slave trade. That erasure or that demolition was in dialogue with the City Chambers. When you were talking earlier about video being a way to map, I am constantly thinking about my body when I'm filming and the fact that I am on site and filming the work. It feels like a more visceral experience. There is something about the presence of my body, that I'm the one who is filming the work and who is framing everything. There is something that is trying to subvert being in frame. A lot of the tools that are used for documentation historically have a specific relationship or they were trying to document black bodies in a very specific way and so I think when I'm on site, I'm always aware of that. I think about what the framing is and how that can be subverted in some way.

SG: It's really interesting for me to think about how you are present through the film elements of some of these works. Even when you don't appear within the frame of the camera, there is a presence there which is of the criticality that you're describing. I'm interested in the Civic Room alongside a number of other spaces in Glasgow which are adopting particular curatorial approaches or artist-led practices which are facilitating this kind of work which I don't think is always possible. I don't think it's always been desired either. Am I right in thinking that you were involved with the committee of Transmission Gallery for a while? I'm interested in your sense of those curatorial approaches, what it is that's required to make space and offer support for interdisciplinary work, but also practice which is interrogating Glasgow's or Scotland's colonial history. Maybe the first of those, the structures that are required to support and sustain these kinds of interdisciplinary or experimental practices.

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TR: The time at Transmission really influenced my practice and thinking quite significantly. I think the set-up of having five–seven people who a lot of the time don't really know each other and come together for two years and try to think about what they want to prioritise for those two years, what sort of programme they want to have. I think that is a really interesting set-up to be involved in because there is lots to learn. Joining Transmission in 2017, it was started in 1980-something, I should know this.

SG: 1983? Early eighties.

TR: When I joined it was thirty-one years old.

SG: [Laughs].

TR: Maths is not one of my strong points. From that time of it being set up it was always trying to offer space for experimentation, for young artists, for young practitioners that weren't in the centre of art in terms of what was being prioritised by bigger galleries at the time. That's something that has stayed, this idea of space offering opportunities for young artists who were trying to experiment. Over the period that I was there, it was also becoming a space for younger collectives like Ubuntu Women Shelter and GSA People of Colour Collective and giving space for these different collectives. During our time, we created a residency which gave resources and space to these different collectives. For about a six-week period the space was handed over to these collectives. It does feel like a lot of different spaces around Scotland and the UK have taken on Transmission's set-up as an artist-run space. I feel like it's a system which works better and which is more responsive to the times we're living in.

SG: There's something really interesting to me about an approach to curation or programming which is less about identifying specific artists who might have a body of work and is more to do with, as you've described it, approaching or working with groups of artists, with collectives and offering them access or control over resources and space for them to make use of on the terms that they define for themselves. There is a kind of act of curation that is about resource sharing and it's also a gesture of making space.

TR: Absolutely. That residency, particularly that making space, that idea came from a moment where a lot of the collectives were getting in touch and asking to use the space because they'd lost access to other spaces that they had and we realised how difficult it

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was to access space in Glasgow and understood that, at the time when I was on the committee, we didn't have a four-year programme. There would be a few months when the space wasn't being used by anyone and we were thinking about how we could offer this up to people to make use of it. It started to feel like the space was becoming a community centre. The previous committee before I joined had really strong relationships with Unity and LGBT Unity and offering that space for fundraisers and different activities, so it felt like we continued with what they had already begun.

SG: I was tracing a few of the projects that you have been involved in and some of the other spaces that you've worked with and there was one that stuck out to me as interesting because of the different organisations that were involved in it, and I don't know whether you'd be interested in talking about it. It was a project that I think was called Chronicles that was a collaboration with Project X but it was also part of National Theatre of Scotland's Futureproof programme. As I understand it, that was a piece made in response to or in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. That was interesting to me as a project which was again maybe a site-responsive one, but also working with Project X and the core of their practice is dance and movement. I don't know if you could speak to that project and what your work in that was?

TR: I was invited by National Theatre of Scotland as a co-director of that project and Claricia Parinussa Kruithof was invited as the co-director or the representative of Project X. There were two producers, Project X, and National Theatre of Scotland and we worked together to create a collaborative, immersive performance in the Scottish galleries working with young people from Edinburgh. The process consisted of these workshops every fortnight on a Saturday and we would meet the young people and have a movement workshop and then we would move over to the galleries where we would do different exercises in writing. I guess what we were doing was mapping essentially. We invited them to look and observe anything that was interesting, anything that they questioned or didn't make any sense, anything that stuck out to them, and what they came back with was so insightful and rich. I remember there was a point in the first few sessions, Claricia and I were just like wow, this is maybe going to be bigger and more complex than we had expected it to be. From that point, we had writing and performance workshops and spent time looking at how we can offer ways of responding to the sites, but also responding to different objects. We really

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didn't have a clear idea what the project was going to be. We knew it was going to be performance, but in terms of the content and the idea behind it, we didn't really want to make that concrete before interacting with the young people. Through working with them, we came to a point of clarity about the project being about writing an alternative history or a history which hasn't been prioritised by the museum. It's the young people's writing and that was made up of writing different texts about the different objects that they came across in the museum and having that integrated with these different performances that they were creating throughout the process which were cited throughout the galleries. It became a promenade performance and so as a visitor to the performance, you were handed a pair of headphones and you were led by the young people on this tour around the galleries. You would come into contact with pop-up performances and collective moments while listening to this audio landscape. It was a really interesting project.

SG: It's making me think in a way that hadn't occurred to me before about the kind of institutional critique that's enabled through that project both in terms of what the young people wanted to do in response to that material, but also in the way in which the museum or the custodians of the collection were being invited to reconsider their own collections or their own practices.

TR: Yes, when I look back on it, we weren't really working with anyone from the museum. I guess the collaboration was them offering space, but there weren't any conversations between the young people and curators of the museum. I think if I had an opportunity to change something or do it again, that's something that I would have really wanted to happen, to have the museum and curators being more conversational with the young people because the young people had so many questions which we weren't able to answer. I think possibly in that way, having the young people in conversation with the museum also could have offered a different perspective and critique that the museums could have been influenced by or taken on in some way. It was interesting nonetheless and that sound piece was created by Niroshini Thambar and Nic Paget-Tomlinson who were working with us throughout the process. They were coming into the different workshops and recording material, going away and editing it, and coming back. By the end, there was this really amazing sound piece which is a work within itself.

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SG: I'm thinking there about the process of developing that work and you and Claricia not having a sense of what the work would be other than it being a performance and that the process was open enough or supportive enough for the journey of making the work to lead where it led. I had one or two other things that I was interested in if you're okay to chat a little longer.

TR: Yes.

SG: One of which was quite explicitly about the frame of live art and I'm conscious that it refers to a particular body of practice in a British tradition and it's used varyingly by different institutions and different artists. In these conversations I'm wary of bringing it to the table and using it to describe anyone's practice when they might not actively use it to describe or think about their own work at all and so I'm trying to hold the concept of live art as a field of interdisciplinary experimentation quite lightly [laughs] but it's there in the name of the project. I'm interested in your sense of live art; does it serve any useful purpose to you in orienting your work or is it a kind of body of practice which is interesting but ultimately not relevant or not a priority for you. I'm interested in your sense of live art's relevance or not to the kind of work that you've been making.

TR: It's interesting. I think you're right when you're talking about live art being something very connected to the British context because that's when I first encountered that term. I think through understanding what it is, it gave me a way to offer a space where some of the work that I have created fits into, which is useful. There is also a sense of community. I think when you're working in these in-between fields that sense of community can be useful. I've never labelled myself as a live artist, as a performer, yes and I think under the umbrella performance, I can do live artwork. I think in terms of projects that I've considered to be live art or have called that, TEXT_ILE which started off as my graduate show and the live art there was a performance installation where I was undoing this Shwe Shwe fabric, this traditional fabric from South Africa, and I was undoing that thread by thread. Each sitting or each performance that I have for that piece lasts for five hours and two seconds. That's how long it takes to produce the twelve yards of fabric. That feels like a live art piece of work that will last for the rest of my life in terms of trying to undo it. I'm only about three inches in after three sittings, so that's fifteen hours and six seconds. I think it's been useful for me to use the phrase live art for specific projects which I feel are uncategorised or are still

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finding their place or space that they exist in in terms of these different ways of describing arts practices, processes, and projects.