

Live Art in Scotland: Vivienne Gaskin

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Stephen Greer (SG): What was your point of entry into this field? How did you become involved in the expanded landscape of live art? Did you come to it through visual art, or performance, or another field entirely?

Vivienne Gaskin (VG): Well, to be honest, I was an imposter and always felt like an imposter in live art. My route into this was I applied to a job at the ICA to be the membership secretary at which I was terrible because I couldn't understand VAX systems and all that kind of thing and obviously what I wanted to do was to do things. I'd been to the Courtauld [Institute of Art] by mistake, and I needed to do something where I was engaging with contemporary art, which was what excited me. I was a kid, I was in London, I was excited. The idea of having this job which was in the membership department and the marketing department, I started to attend these meetings which were weekly summaries with all the programmers and I was very much aware that the programmers were held in a sort of quasi-godlike capacity at that time, which is fascinating. They were all good people, but it was still very strange. What I remember distinctly is a marketing report on a talk that they'd had that week, which was such a good part of the ICA's programme, and the director at the time and I won't mention him, but he embellished on how important he was and the connections and the themes that came out and I asked, so how many people came? And he said six and then he continued. Something hit me, this idea of the fewer the merrier as long as they're the right people and I thought there's something really wrong here. I started to

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think about the ICA, it was much less logical than it sounds, and it was quite clear that there was no connection. There was no connectivity between what was happening in each of the spaces and in fact, they were almost untouchable spaces. Live art was in the theatre in the black box, visual art was only in the gallery, the talks were in the Nash and Brandon rooms. We were called The Institute of Contemporary Arts and it seemed that this kind of fragmented programming, which was all done seasonally. There was a season in the cinema for example, and the audiences were so different. And yet, what struck me outside of the ICA there were lots of cultures coming together, particularly in some of the experimental club nights that were happening in what was then interesting East London. To add to this, I'd just worked with the wonderful Joshua Compston at Factual Nonsense, so I'd had the privilege of seeing somebody who really saw everyday space as a curated space and had this idea of bringing people together, silliness, having entertainment there and yet there was some serious arts and conversations there. Remember that Hoxton at this time was rough [laughs]. You couldn't get a taxi home. So being part of that and witnessing things that he was involved with really struck a chord with me. I'd read about him in the paper, and I dropped in the gallery and said can I help and I spent a year working with him. Sadly, when he passed, sorry, this is a bit of a random journey but having all this background and being more interested in this, it seemed to me that there was a gap in the market and I'm using a staple marketing phrase there but there was something missing. I also was aware that it was the same audiences coming back. I started to see the same faces going in. We used to call them the rain mac brigade, which were the dirty old men who used to come and watch the films at lunchtime. Anyway, what had started just prior to my starting there was Robin Rimbaud had approached the ICA. He needed a home for electronic music, and he wanted it to be in this kind of café culture and started The Electronic Lounge. So we had Electronic Lounge and it seemed to me, remember I was young, I was twenty-six at the time, it struck me that that was creating another space. A connected space where people didn't necessarily come for it, although there was an audience, but people sort of stumbled across it. It was a lovely idea that this democratic space, forgive me I'm a romantic, but it felt like a democratic space. Under the radar I started to bring in a few more, they weren't in any of the ICA's equivalents but they just sort of happened. There was a guy called Ron and we'd started to use this bar space for things which were more collaborative, and I started this policy which was if anyone wanted to talk to me about an idea, I would meet with them.

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This was kind of my antidote to we're booked three-four years ahead. Again, if you're a contemporary art space, I know it sounds very simplistic, you should be talking to people now. You should be acting now, and you should be reactive to the world. I understand it's a different thing. Anyway, that went on for a few weeks and we started to do a few of these events. Then I got called in and told quite seriously that I am not here to programme, I am here to do membership. So I asked for a deal. I said let me do a few more of these events working with visual artists. Artists and comedians were rock stars at that time and they were martyred as rock stars. I said let me do a series of events just with visual artists in this informal space. Put it in the programme, if it doesn't work, I'll go away [laughs]. So we did these series of events which rather sadly were called Event 1, Event 2. It was not my most imaginative time. One of them we had Tracey Emin and you realised the power that you had at the ICA, it was like wow, I've got a toy. One had Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing and Georgina Star and we had some of their film work down at the cinema after the programme finished at 9pm. We kicked off at 9pm and they were doing some DJing and believe it or not, they had Tiger Feet on. That was always interesting. The place was obviously packed and Joplin was in the bar for the first time and it was this kind of whole menagerie of people. The back-up if you like, everyone was there and wanted to see this. Something made me realise that if you start to put little hooks into these events of something that is known beside something that is unknown, or is much more of a struggle to market such as short films, spoken word, visual art, time-based work. That sort of started the programme. We did Jake and Dinos Chapman which was like Throbbing Gristle on eleven [laughs] and they showed their porn film, *Bring Me the Head of*. The audience started big and went down as time went on. Then there was a change of management and Philip Dodd came in. A lot of people have different relationships with Philip. I saw huge a huge turnover of staff [laughs]. But he liked this programme. He liked the idea of something that was collaborative, which made sense of the space. We were sneaking into everyone's space, the corridor became our space, we'd do these floor area exhibitions and use some of the other spaces. There was a night we had William Burroughs exhibition for four hours and it was like I think we need extra security. I was playing and I was very lucky to play, and I learned a lot. They started to become part of the programme. So that was my route. In terms of live art, this is where I get very bad imposter syndrome because I was coming on the tail, I crossed over with Lois's and Catherine's programme, which was extraordinary. They made live art. Okay, so no pressure.

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We crossed over but there was a certain hierarchy so there were nights when there were performances on. I remember still that Lois would come out and she'd pull the plug on the music in the bar. There was a prioritisation in terms of one was art and culture and one was messing about. I went to quite a bit of her programme and it was fascinating, but I had a problem with it. My problem with it was this idea of voyeur, an audience not experiencing, detached from, looking in on somebody else's acute experience, particularly people like Franko B and body-based work which was dominant at that time. I did have a problem with it, I felt like there was a detachment between audience and performer, which I know has always been there in many other ways. I couldn't see where it was going. But equally, I was no expert, and they were the experts. Sadly, they left and they set up the Live Art Development Agency which was great and then I had a ridiculous conversation with Philip Dodd. He said because so many people have left, which department do you want to go into. I said not film because I don't know anything about film. I said maybe visual arts and he said they won't let you do what you want to do, you'll hate it. There was nobody in live art, so suddenly I was live art and that's how I got into live art.

Stephen Greer (SG): [Laughs]. That's great.

VG: It's strange. But yes, that imposter syndrome I carry to this day. When I got your email, I did my rehearsing.

SG: I think that's such a great story, but also so revealing of how a few major art institutions were going through, including those in Scotland, quite complicated and sometimes fractious internal restructures to try to find a shape that worked to support the kind of art that they were interested in. Then also how expertise or names get associated with particular art forms and it is through a combination of experience and knowledge, but also happenstance.

VG: Yes. And certainly the cult of the curator was absolutely at its height at that time. It was the fight as to whose name was on the invite, was it the curator or the artist. That kind of power was again something I didn't feel comfortable with. My job was a facilitator, a mediator. I avoided the term curator for a long time because it was kind of saying it was about my ideas and it wasn't. I was so fortunate; I came in via the back door. Iain Forsyth and Jan Pollard said it's not so much that she came in the back door, but she nicked the keys to the back door [laughs]. The ICA was a public playground, that was what it was formed for. Adult playground, that was the branding back in 1945, that was the idea. Nobody was

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playing, everyone was being so desperately serious. I love pop culture, I love entertainment, and I love artists who work with that medium. I suppose they were the people I sought out from then on it.

SG: I know you worked for a number of years in that particular role before coming up to the CCA to take over leadership of the artistic programme and education, I think that's what the role was at that point. Was that your first point of contact with Scotland and Glasgow, or did you have some sense of the CCA's work or the Third Eye Centre's work prior to coming to Scotland?

VG: I was very aware of the history of the CCA. In my eyes it was always the Scottish counterpart to the ICA. I had visits from various people from the CCA over the years who were interested in the club night programme and wanted to get an idea of how we'd started. They were interested in the new audiences it was bringing in. This was partly the downside to the club nights, people saw it as a marketing thing.

SG: As an exercise in bringing in audience rather than a thing in its own right?

VG: Yes. I still see a lot of places make that mistake. They contact me and say we want to bring in the young people and I think some of the Late at Tate, anyway we'll go onto that another time. I'd had these conversations and they were obviously interested in the programme. I had some strange people. People from the Pompidou came and they wanted to start to do it. It suddenly became a sort of virus that people came to get involved with which is interesting. In terms of Scotland, I saw the job and I thought in terms of having a bigger toy to play with, this couldn't be bigger or more interesting. It's a brand-new space which turned out not to be an asset always, but it was a new space. In some ways I saw it, looking back perhaps a bit naïvely, as a bit of a clean slate and how many times in your life will you have an opportunity to do this, but it turned out not to be, and a chance to expand the remit of this interdisciplinary programming that I was doing across a multi-site venue, so I was beyond excited for it.

SG: This is a moment where the CCA has had a lot of work done to it, physical work, but I think like all capital projects, quite protracted and quite difficult even though it notionally came in on budget or as close to on budget as any capital project ever does. What's your memory of the building and of being in there? I know that the internal shape of it has

changed a bit more in recent years, but what's your memory of the space? My memory of the space was this enormous courtyard with bits of art space attached. It had this beautiful courtyard, which turned out to be the restaurant. The galleries were pushed to the back and they kept leaking and then you had the space upstairs, which in my mind was set up as an acoustic space. It was beautiful obviously for music, but it wasn't a black box and I think that was problematic for a lot of programming. You didn't have the intimacy. They had Jorge Pardo's work in the bar. It just dominated, it meant that you couldn't play with that space because suddenly there was an identity. That was sad because it meant that just became a space, a bar. Then you had all of these little cinemas and a space at the front, which I really like, the shop front. I thought that was a great space, but the problem was these dreams and romanticisms of connectivity were not part of the architecture. They were absolutely fragmented spaces and everything was kind of a journey through people having a bowl of pasta.

SG: So then when you start to programme, or imagine programming work into that space, I guess there's a balancing act between knowing the identities or the qualities of each of these spaces and their relationship to each other and what a particular artist's work might need. I guess it's never an exact fit and then there has to be a judgement call about how much can I force a square peg into a round hole.

VG: Yes, I think that's exactly it. The thing I alluded to earlier and that I didn't realise was, and this is one of the problems of coming into a different country, that people really had a history of love and growing up and maturation with the Third Eye Centre and it was a dirty, gritty place, it was a bit messy, but it made things happen. And this was brand spanking new. This was a collection of long-protracted visits round Europe to see the beautiful white spaces and it brought bits of everything home and the problem was it didn't have an identity. People really didn't like the new CCA and that was a real shame. A lot of it was sentimentalism and part of it was nostalgia, but part of it was this fragmentation of the architecture. The way that people used to articulate it to me, there was a prioritisation of commerce, the book shop, the café, the bar and restaurant over art. That art was almost physically second string. That really caused a big issue of alienation in those early days. Hopefully it's all gone down now, but in those early days it was very controversial. Starting the programme, I brought up a big programme for the launch, which had a mixture of

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Scottish, but mainly people I'd worked with in London and that didn't go down well. I didn't realise in my mind that I was going to a different country. I was very naïve. I didn't realise I was going to a different country in terms of people. There was a demand made at that time quite frequently to me that this is only for Scottish artists, which blew my mind. It was that kind of closing down of options at the start of something new and I found that very difficult. We did actually present lots of brilliant Scottish artists but the weird nationalism that I hadn't anticipated. Part of that was nostalgia for the Third Eye Centre and this idea of DIY culture and instead some woman's come in from London with her big ideas in this swanky new building which is just a restaurant and I think that was a lot of negativity to take on board right at the very beginning and was probably the reason I didn't stay terribly long.

SG: That sounds like an incredibly challenging set of circumstances and it's making me also think that there is a longer history there in which what you're describing sits, which is about various different festivals in Glasgow always going back and forth between support for Scottish artists and Scottish arts practices and also being fiercely internationalist and wanting to bring in different kinds of art form from all over the world and being fiercely proud that they're in Glasgow. Doing both of those things or trying to find a balance between those two things. Thinking about the way in which Mayfest changed its programming over the years, it feels like there's an echo of the dynamic you were describing there as well.

VG: Yes, I think there's certainly some truth in that. It was daunting to deal with. But it was a challenge of the time and one that was interesting. The other thing to counter that in terms of programming, was that I did actually feel at ease bringing in straight down the line live art into the CCA because it didn't have that history of the ICA, because it didn't have that baggage of 'this is where live art is..'. I felt much more at ease having a much more integrated live programme. We did collaborations with Fierce Festival I remember with Diamanda Galas, bless her, she was fab. Annie Sprinkle came, you know, but I felt much more at ease because it didn't feel nostalgic. To put those on at the ICA would've felt nostalgic to me in terms of almost saying there was a time of live art, rather than it being a progression of live art. That was one of the great assets of working there, but the space wasn't very good.

SG: Can I ask about a few of the projects that you were involved in commissioning there?

One that I was particularly drawn to was Rod Dickinson exhibition and re-enactment which was called *The Tenth Level*. As I understand it, it was a re-enactment through film and performance of two different historical events, one of which was the Stanley Milgram experiment. How did that project come about?

VG: Rod and I had worked together many times. Sorry to jump back, one of the first things I did at the ICA when I joined and when there was still a crossover, was to engage Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard in their first proper re-enactment. I'd read that they'd done this project in a space in East London which was a Smiths re-enactment and I thought ooh, this is interesting, artists playing with pop culture, what's going on. I invited them in, and they were astonishing, I've never met artists quite like them. We went on to present The Smiths and it started to formulate some of the codes and the rules for re-enactment and trying to make that clear distinction between tribute and re-enactment. I thought they were playing with that beautifully. Rod came and Tom McCarthy, who went on to do an event with me. So, the first things I did with Rod were at the ICA. We did *The Waco Reenactment* at a speed wayside in Essex which caused a lot of problems, but that was a good one, and we did the Jones Town re-enactment. This was Rod. Rod wanted to play not so much with popular culture, but these moments of history which are extraordinary. What does it mean for these things to have happened? What kind of relationship is there between obedience and authority? That's what he loved playing with. So, when he approached me and said he wanted to do the Milgram, it made natural sense and it didn't have to be a lone performance because the amount of work that went into these for two or three hours was almost heart-breaking. It's one of the casualties of live art I realise. I commissioned him and we built the Milgram lab in the galleries, and we had ephemera around the walls which were relating to that. If I remember rightly, it was an eleven-hour performance. It was a long, durational performance with limited numbers. We as the audience were sat just outside the lab which was all glazed and it was a moment by moment re-enactment of the entire experiment that Milgram did. The lovely thing about that time-based piece, which was then recorded and was shown as part of the exhibition, was that over that time you really did start to question your own moral coding. That was the wonder of it, it was quite a special piece for that reason. It was also a chance to start to tie in different aspects, so the

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film programme started to relate to that. There were different aspects of the programme that started to tie into it. I worked with Rebecca Shatwell who now runs something interesting in the northeast and we started to integrate more and more programming. It was the first chance to look at working across the departments and working with the space as a whole. It was a great piece of work, it was mind-boggling, but it was terrific. To start something with eleven hours was pretty tough going, but everybody stayed. It was extraordinary and it was continuing that theme of re-enactment, which then obviously got picked up by other artists, but it was one of the founding pieces I think along with A Rock N Roll Suicide.

SG: I'm really interested there in how the frame of that is setting up the live event and its documentation and an exhibition space, the elements are sort of being put into conversation with each other and you might as an audience member, encounter that work multiple times in multiple ways over the duration of its installation.

VG: By being in the gallery, it was art. It was unquestionably art and that really did matter. That gave it that stamp of approval and the duration, re-encountering it as a changing phenomenon, and with extra dimensions happening throughout the period. It was on for three months. The press loved it. There was quite a lot of suspicion around the work, I think because it was performance-based and was quite alien to what the dominant strands of visual arts practice in Scotland at that time were. It didn't really fit in. It didn't get the warmest of responses locally, but as an international project it was tremendous.

SG: I'm interested in thinking about it as qualifying as art because it's in the gallery space, but also just thinking about maybe parallel but different qualities of spaces at Tramway on the other side of the city and thinking about its own history as a performance venue but also a visual arts venue. Did you have many encounters with Tramway during your time in Glasgow.

VG: We collaborated with them. The Arches was the other one as well. We did some collaborations, not as much as I would have liked to be honest. To my defence, I moved two months before the CCA opened and it was still a building site, so it was a bit of a baptism of fire. I think the main collaboration came through Nikki's programme. The budgets were inevitably tight.

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SG: So that would've been New Moves before it became New Territories. I have a list of when the festival changed its name progressively, but I have yet to hold it in my head.

VG: I'm terrible with dates.

SG: It was a programme of dance and choreography which had started at the CCA and moved across the city.

VG: That was a terrific programme and one that did get this city-wide connectivity. I was really happy to collaborate with people to that extent. It was a short period of time and a lot to do [laughs].

SG: There was one last thing I was interested in maybe chatting to you about, and it was about your sense of your broader approach to curation and commissioning, and particularly supporting inter-disciplinary practices. Having worked in these two major institutions, both of which maybe have their own histories of compartmentalised disciplines and attempts within both institutions to bring those disciplines into conversation with each other, I think repeated attempts with lots of different interesting outcomes. I'm interested in your sense of what's at stake and what's needed when it comes to supporting those kinds of inter-disciplinary practices, or when you're merging live art with other registers of arts practice.

VG: In some ways it was down to my non-expertise, that I wasn't a visual art curator because then the loyalty and the need to build up an immediate network, is lost. I didn't belong. Call me a jack of all trades, I really don't know. I was learning as I was exploring and that was in some ways strange but what an opportunity. The idea of playing with things, playing with cultures and responding to ideas. Rather than following somebody through several Biennales and then making the approach etc etc, it was much more instinctive. I would listen to everyone who had an idea, which was actually very time consuming. I then saw myself as part of that process. I was connecting people and I loved connecting ideas up. I think a lack of expertise and a bit of naivety and a sense that the best of culture is in the cracks, the in-betweeners, it's the stuff that cross-fertilises that's always interested me because somehow there's an avenue in for most people who want to engage with it. It doesn't belong to anybody. The hardship of that is that you go to *Time Out* or *The List* and there's no section. You're like where's the miscellaneous section. This idea of collaborative arts that the Scottish Arts Council had at the time was literally like I don't know what to do

with this. I think my approach was naïve, my approach was curious in terms of how cultures meet and what you can do with it. I think we used to call it new hybrids. It was about trying to find a way of mediating that in the most democratic terms you can, which is why the club nights for me were proper art because I mediated them as club nights. That was a success for me. Within that night there would be some quite difficult works or unusual works on, but you could choose. It was the playground that these venues are meant to be. That's there for the artist to come and play as much as me. I'm just the person that links them up. I do think that spirit comes through at times, but I still think the market of the visual arts is that it always has the supremacy. I think that the curator within that is still seen as far too important. I think it just needs stepping back from the ego, that founder syndrome, you know. I was very lucky to be aligned with re-enactments, but it wasn't my idea, it was the artist's idea. I was responding to it and then we could see where that could go. We saw other artists who suddenly saw this idea of history, memory, and identity as a really playful area.

SG: That idea of playfulness is so interesting. It's making me reconsider what we might otherwise call risk, or creative risk. Maybe it's a synonym for the same sort of spirit of possibility, but I do wonder whether that sense of not having a fixed identification with a particular kind of discipline and its expectations is enabling risk-taking, because there aren't the same sort of things at stake, or maybe there isn't anything at stake because you don't feel like you have an existing commitment that has to be honoured somehow. I don't want to put words in your mouth there, but I'm thinking about what that playfulness allows for.

VG: I wasn't a career curator. I wasn't thinking forward at all. The high and low thing just seemed like a silly game to me. It is a silly game. It's much less present now, but it was very present at the time. The ICA that I encountered and the CCA encountered saw art forms as distinct territories and that was because they had different financial models around them: one was very heavily subsidised, one had a commercial model around it, one had great international profile. If you keep on playing that game, you just end up responding to market standards. I think if you're going to have a space called something for contemporary arts, then let be that. Let them talk to each other, let them play with each other, let's remove that. This is a playground. When I read Herbert Read say that this is an adult playground, then why have we all stopped playing, why are we all so serious? Why have we

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stopped talking to each other? You always learn more if you're at the centre of the circle than if your own little section. I hope audiences got that by being able to access from different points, whether it was a club night, or it was an eleven-hour durational performance.