

## Live Art in Scotland: Harry Josephine Giles

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Harry Josephine Giles (HJG): I've always performed [laughs] since I was very small. I've always been a performer. I grew up in Orkney, so at the beginning that really just meant community theatre, school plays, musicals et cetera, but I was a performer that whole time. Then when I was an undergraduate at St. Andrews, I began directing theatre. I fell into theatre directing just sort of by accident. There was a chance to do a ten-minute play thing and I did a piece of Ionesco and over the course of that time my directing got more and more abstract. I finished with a production of *4.48 Psychosis*, very undergraduate, but there you are.

Stephen Greer (SG): [Laughs]

HJG: I really enjoyed directing and that led me to do a Masters in Theatre Directing. So, I actually trained as a theatre director at East 15 Acting School at the University of Essex, and during that course in London I suppose I got more and more into contemporary theatre, live art, that kind of world. I didn't really know what I was doing, but essentially, I drifted from theatre through contemporary theatre into live art. What is the difference between contemporary performance and live art? There isn't one. It's called contemporary performance when it comes from a theatre background and it's in that economy and it's called live art when it comes from a visual art background and it's in that economy. It's social circles and systems of financing, right? That's what defines these things. And then when I came back to Scotland, I tried to get work as a theatre director for a while, I still

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thought I kind of wanted to do plays, it didn't really go anywhere and that just kind of led me down the road of doing solo work because that was all I could afford to do. I was very involved in the Forest Café, so I fell into the Forest Fringe milieu and then into the BUZZCUT milieu, and just got kind of more into the weirder more performance-y end of things, but I still think of myself as a theatre person and when I come into live art, I come from theatre.

SG: So, when you were first starting, or when you were making kind of solo works, that's the sort of period where the show or the work, *What We Owe* comes out of that sort of time which was as a one-to-one piece.

HJG: That's right, yes.

SG: And that was staged at Forest Fringe? Was that staged at BUZZCUT as well or had you moved onto other shows by then?

HJG: I think it might have pre-dated BUZZCUT?

SG: Yes. I want to say 2012, I've got a note somewhere [laughs]

HJG: No, I did do a piece at BUZZCUT the first year actually. That wasn't at BUZZCUT, but it was at Arches Live, so it was in that field. I began developing *What We Owe*... that was made with a little team that I made by myself in Edinburgh then it had various different incarnations until it kind of finalised itself through that Forest Fringe incarnation but yes, it's been all over. That's been like my most travelled piece of work, although I think I've left it behind now.

SG: I guess there's something there which is about the literal economy of a solo work which is small, which is self-contained, and which can be staged in lots and lots of different environments.

HJG: Yes, it's cheap for an artist to stage, but that's a one-to-one piece so it's financially unviable, like there is no commercial possibility for one-to-one work unless you're able to charge people hundreds of pounds, it cannot cover your time. It's something I like about one-to-one work, it's only possible with subsidy at any kind of scale.

SG: So alongside that performance work, you're also a writer and perhaps you're maybe better known as a writer and a poet. Have those tracks sort of developed at the same time?

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In retrospect, it's maybe easier to create a narrative, but have they developed alongside each other? Are they feeding into each other?

HJG: They feed into each other. I've said for a long time, I'm a writer and a performer and I work in theatre and poetry and games. I also have a track in games which is actually where my money comes from. I'm writing for a video game that's all under a non-disclosure agreement so I can't talk about it [laughs] quite fun.

SG: I know the game company, maybe we'll come back and talk about it, because I've played one of their games.

HJG: Right! And actually, the studio they deserve a theatre[and]-live art presence. So yes, it all feeds into each other and for me, I consider all of this part of my artistic practice. It is necessary economically to frame things in different ways and poetry people know that I do some performance stuff, but they don't necessarily understand it because they're poetry people and theatre people know that I do some poetry stuff, but they don't necessarily understand it because it's poetry. I've been more economically successful in poetry. And at the moment, you know it's quite nice having multiple disciplines, because in lockdown it means I can do poetry. I've done very very little performance work, or anything related to performance in the last year and I miss it, terribly, and maybe I'll come back to performance.

SG: So, it's interesting then, you've got a show like *Drone* which is a theatre piece or touring into theatre spaces but is for me, is sitting really closely, it sits in a practice of poetry and is being published I guess in collections of poetry if I'm right?

HJG: Yes, it was published as a book long before, it was published as a book in 2015 when I was scratching performances of it, but it didn't officially premiere as a show. Do you know what, it had its first performance at BUZZCUT so there's a connection. Several years later it was in the Made In Scotland showcase in 2019, it was in the Made In Scotland showcase. Well, it was supposed to be a multi-country world tour and then Hong Kong got cancelled because of the riots, so it ended up just being New Zealand but there you are. I have a higher profile in literature than I do in theatre which is fine, and I've made a bit more money in literature but for me, doing stuff like *Drone*, like that's the kind of, that's when I get to bring all of my disciplines together and for my next book, I do have a similar hope, but

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whether I can make it happen I don't know. Who knows, I've got lots of years of life yet. We'll see what happens.

SG: Yeah. So, *Drone* was, I know it was performed with Neil Simpson and Jamie Wardrop, were they people you knew and had worked with before? Or how did that relationship for making that piece come together?

HJG: Neil I met because of co-curating *Anatomy*, Neil had shown some work at *Anatomy*, and I knew I wanted to work with a sound artist for *Drone*, so I just got in touch with sound artists that I knew, and Neil and I got on and it worked out really well. Jamie, I didn't know previously but I headhunted him because of his work on *Beats*, Kieran Hurley's show *Beats*, so all of this loops together and links up, you know. I think we should be really honest, social connections are really important. I know Kieran because of *Forest Fringe*, we get on, we've chatted for years. I really liked Kieran's show *Beats*, that's why I hired Jamie, that's how it comes about [laughs].

SG: You mentioned *Anatomy* there, that was one of the things I was really interested in talking to you about, maybe we can talk about how that came about, because I know that's kind of another collaborative project that started off with you and Ali Maloney, and then later joined by Brian Hutchinson?

HJG: Brian Hutchinson's our technical person and then Melanie Purdie joined us as our producer and marketing person.

SG: Awesome. So, I think the first event for *Anatomy* was something like 2012 I want to say?

HJG: Sounds about right.

SG: Yes. So what was the origins of *Anatomy*? I think I've read a little bit online of you sort of talking about or [inaudible] found it, maybe Ali talking about it being a response to the absence of that kind of opportunity, but particularly maybe in Edinburgh the absence of that opportunity.

HJG: Ali and I literally had a chat in a pub, where we were like nobody's producing the kind of work we're interested in, in Edinburgh and at the time there was a bit, there was a lot actually in Glasgow, because of the *Arches*, and that whole scene around the *Arches*, the *CPP* course, but we were in Edinburgh like where's our stuff, we want to see our stuff! And

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also Ali's and my aesthetic tastes, we've got some different interests I would say. We both come from a spoken word background which is kind of odd and Ali also has a background in clowning, and I have a background in theatre, and we're both really into cabaret and we liked seeing live art in a cabaret context and we've always programmed live art, but we've also always programmed jugglers and dancers, and we like music hall and cabaret. So, we put it on because no one else is putting it on and then we gradually built it into something that could sustain artists and sustain ourselves. We have had a few years of funding which is something that helped us exist [laughs].

SG: Yes.

HJG: It's something that I'm proud of. It came about because there was a need and we wanted somewhere that showed the kind of work we were interested in and that could show our work if we weren't directing it. Do you know what, the first ever scratch of *Drone* happened at Anatomy. Early on, Ali and I experimented with putting our own pieces in the program just for fun and we were like no this is a nightmare, we're never doing that again, ever.

SG: [laughs] Because it's just too much in your head to be able to perform and to hold the space for the night as well?

HJG: I have to move room, so you're going to wobble about a little bit.

SG: Sure, no problem.

HJG: My partner and I only have one office, so we have so we have to move back and forth a lot.

SG: No worries at all.

HJG: Okay.

SG: Okay. There are a few things that I'm really sort of interested in exploring a bit more with you. I think the frame of live art cabaret, there's so much about the space of live art and performance art which is serious and even solemn, and it also has a really difficult, if not resistant, relationship to what are perceived to be popular forms. I think the framing of live art cabaret feels like a really specific push back against that from my perspective

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[laughs], but I'm wary of reading too much into what your intentions, yours and Ali's might be.

HJG: No, no you're exactly correct. That's very intentional. It's always been intentional. I find the solemnity of live art a nightmare, I don't want to sit in any more concrete basements with no cushions. I'm 34, my back can't take it. It's tedious. I don't know, it's inherited from the white box gallery and I find it exclusionary and pointless, and it doesn't provide any meaningful aesthetic frame, yeah. I'm very, very hostile to the seriousness of live art. Do you know what, I apply the 'rabbit rabbit' test?

SG: I don't know this test, no. Please.

HJG: Do you know the sitcom *Spaced*? Do you remember the sitcom *Spaced*?

SG: Yes.

HJG: You know the episode where they go see Vulva's new live art performance?

SG: I do.

HJG: Right. So, at the end of that, I mean there's various quotable things from that, at the end of that show, Daisy attempts to do some performance art, processing her rejection from a female fashion magazine where she stands on stage in a rabbit suit going, rabbit rabbit rabbit rabbit rabbit rabbit. And so, whenever I'm watching live art I think, if this were featured on the sitcom *Spaced*, this is what I call the 'rabbit rabbit' test, would I laugh at it? And if so, something's wrong.

SG: [laughs]

HJG: And usually what's wrong is the framing, because if Daisy were performing rabbit rabbit rabbit rabbit as part of a cabaret and we were encouraged to laugh along with her, it would be a good piece of art.

SG: I think it's maybe because of the last week people I've been talking to, I've been thinking more and more about live art as a sort of series of structures that give permission. It's not a genre that I can pin down and I'm certainly not the first person to come to that conclusion, but the idea that what I may be looking for, or looking at, are enabling structures or permission structures. I think the permission to laugh is a really important one for me because I mean I came from a background of comedy before I became a theatre academic.

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HJG: There you are! There you are, knowing how to have a good time! And we're so busy giving permission to artists to do things, can we give permission to audiences to have a nice time? At least give them a nice chair to sit in, you know what I mean? We hand out cushions at Anatomy because the chairs in Summerhall are-

SG: Well I was going to ask about the space at Summerhall, because you reference rhetorically and literally the white box gallery space, the spaces at Summerhall are certainly not blank canvases, they're not neutral spaces. You're working in, is it the Anatomy theatre space? I can never remember if they renamed during The Fringe or did they retain the same names? When you have been putting together the night and programming it, have you often been working in anticipation of that space? Is that part of the conversation you have with artists coming in?

HJG: Yes, we program to fit the space. We'll always try and make a piece of work fit the space if it doesn't, but we program based on what we think is going to work with that audience. When people are applying, we say this is the space it's going to be in, if it's like this steeply raked wooden lecture theatre you have to think about whether it's going to fit in that. We have worked in other spaces and we will program for other spaces, but that's our kind of heart space. I think that's because we go further back from cabaret into music hall as our real inspiration. For me, the aesthetic difference between cabaret and music hall is that in cabaret, you're sat around tables with drinks and the performers are on a stage above you, and in music hall, you're up in a rake in rows of audiences with drinks, and you're looking down on the artists and I think that makes a huge difference. They're slightly different social forms, so yes, it's a cabaret but it's also a music hall.

SG: Lovely. I remember when you were doing call-outs for people to propose work, a note appeared at one stage saying that we can't do aerial work, I'm afraid there is no space for anyone to fly at the moment, which I really appreciated. It feels like there is a lot of work which is sort of informed by aerial practice or by acrobatics and by other kinds of body-based performance forms which are at Anatomy. I'm conscious that there's a big overlap between choreographic and dance forms and live art but less of an overlap between let's say circus forms and live art, or there's maybe a thickening overlap, I'm maybe seeing more work of that kind perhaps because of nights like Anatomy actually. That note about not being able to support aerialists, it's just you know, a material fact, but was that also a

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response to the fact that you were getting aerialists coming to you and saying I want to do a scratch performance?

HJG: Yes, but we have programmed aerialists but just ones that can work with a free-standing rig, so we did quite a bit of work with Kasia Zawadzka. I think we can talk about social connections and we can also talk about like attracting like. Ali came through the physical theatre course, the physical theatre diploma that was run, and it's quite connected to the physical theatre world and through physical theatre world that takes us into the circus arts world, but also once you start programming people from one section of the arts, they tell their pals and their pals apply, and you get more of those and because from the beginning we consistently reached out to different networks, we were never that interested in sticking to the live art network. Though we did advertise to the live art network, but we were always reaching out to other bits of the arts, because what we're interested in is not live art, it's performance, it's things that happen in a room that we find exciting. And yes, we get clowns because we program clowns and we get jugglers because we program jugglers and we get rope artists because we program rope artists, and that's how it's built over time, I think.

SG: Nice. I'm conscious that with or as Anatomy, you've then taken Anatomy into other spaces or you've programmed Anatomy for other spaces. So, some of the ones I'm aware of are programming or supporting *Peep* at Pleasance, but also doing a couple of big shows, or sort of best of shows, I don't know if that's the language you use, best of shows at the Traverse. What's it been like taking Anatomy out of its home space into those other territories?

HJG: Always a good learning experience. We also did something at the zoo, that was fun. We did some walkabouts at the zoo, I don't think anyone knew what we were in for. We did some work for Surge as well. In the early days we were experimenting with a lot of different stuff to find out what we were doing and that was also pre-funding, so we kind of took whatever gig came our way [laughs] and then in the later days, once we had funding, we were much more strategic about it and the reason that we worked with the Traverse is it enables us to leverage more money and that means we can pay people better and we can put some higher production values in place and that's our interest in working with the Traverse. That way we are also building a bridge to a theatre audience, which means access

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to reviews, which means access to different kinds of social status within the arts, different kinds of networks, and that benefits our artists, it helps our artists to find more work in those spaces and for us, it's always about we love programming and we've had a very economically driven mission of making performance viable for people and building economic opportunities and building better working conditions for artists. That's been important to us from the beginning. So that's why the Traverse and it's mostly worked for us.

SG: It feels like that has also gone hand in hand with a commitment to a really high level of transparency. I know that you sort of run an open books model and that records of how you are spending your budget, how arts funding from Creative Scotland is coming in and coming out. I don't know that there are many, if any, other organisations in Scotland [laughs] a few in the rest of the UK maybe, but I'm not aware of many others in Scotland if any, who have committed to that level of transparency. Was that an easy decision to make? Did that seem obvious?

HJG: I mean, to me yes [laughs]. I do that with my own work, I post my income online every year because I'm paid for by taxes. My whole life is paid for by taxes. This is the first year of my life where the majority of my money has come from the private sector [laughs]. My money comes from the public sector, so they deserve to know where it's coming from, but also, it's not actually that, it's also that working conditions only get better for artists if we share our working conditions. If I can say, this is how I'm earning money, this is where my money comes from, this is what it's like. I know other artists find that useful and I find it useful to know how other artists are paying for their lives and that's why I do it, because it helps us make better working conditions.

SG: Okay.

HJG: So that was my suggestion for Anatomy and that was something I kind of pushed for. And there are no costs to that, we've never lost anything doing that and I think it's been useful to the people.

SG: Yes, and I can also imagine how it really builds confidence in lots of different ways, both with artists but also other prospective partners. It feels like there is a double game being played there. You're able to demonstrate that you can do the proper management thing,

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which maybe a mainstream funder is looking for, while at the same time turning that model on its head by kind of going, actually our priorities are possibly quite different from yours.

HJG: Trying to, yes.

SG: I was also interested in the project that you, that Anatomy had done with Imagineate. So how did that come about because I know they have an ongoing interest in performance art and live art for younger people and for children?

HJG: It came about because Ali had kids. I'm really emphasising coincidence and just personal aspects of our lives, because I could give you an intellectual answer about the importance of live art for children, but it happened because Ali had kids just as we started Anatomy and we couldn't go to the types of shows we wanted to go to because they didn't exist. Ali was like, what, there's nothing I can take my kids to that I'm excited about, it's all clowns clapping. Let's make something my kids would be excited about so I can take my kids to it. That's how that happened, and then we built the connections from there.

SG: Lovely. I like that, it's not pragmatism it's something else. Again, maybe what we're talking about is a response to need, of kind of going there's a thing that I want in the world, and I think other people want it in the world as well perhaps.

HJG: Yes. And once we had that spark, we found all sorts of important things about it. Toddlers are the perfect audience for live art because they have no expectations of plot or character, or any of the conventions of theatre. We can interact with them because they bring surprise, because you can live in sensory duration. It's a really exciting space to do live art. We worked with Imagineate because they were interested in tapping into the artists we worked with. They wanted to find more artists doing interesting work and we were a useful portal for that.

SG: Okay, great. So, I know that Anatomy as you said has been supported by Creative Scotland at different periods, but sort of on a project basis, like quite a lot of other organisations in Scotland. So maybe there's a slightly more complicated question that I'm interested in, which is about the sustainability of these spaces for live art and certainly the work that I've been doing so far, has been looking at patterns of really fierce activity and sometimes quite sustained activity, but it's also activity which is very vulnerable to funding disappearing, and also vulnerable to burnout and it's also vulnerable because it's really

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dependant on personal relationships and those personal relationships themselves can get burnt out or can become exclusionary or can become something other than generative.

HJG: Yes. Personal relationships have always been really good in the team, which is really helpful. Yes, really good in the team and I think that's partly because we're a lot more formal than a lot of organisations and have been formal from the start. We have never tried to be an open collective, we have never tried to be a fluid, non-hierarchical organisation. We are actually a non-hierarchical organisation, we're a workers' co-operative, but we're formally constituted, we recruit people for specific things that we need to happen, and we build those careful relationships. We're not trying to do everything at once. So, it's always been a really solid team which is good. We're super vulnerable to funding and that's why we haven't done anything during the pandemic. We ran out of money, and we had a negative funding decision at the beginning of the pandemic, and we're gone, because it's a pandemic and we don't have the capacity. None of us in the team have had the capacity to do another funding application right now. For a year we haven't had the capacity to do another funding application because we're surviving in a pandemic. We have consistently tried to get longer-term funding out of Creative Scotland and it's always been, almost but not quite. Multiple times we have applied for two years of funding, always with the rationale that on a year-by-year cycle we can never build sustainability and we've said that over and over. We can't build sustainability on a year-by-year cycle, because as soon as you've got one lot of funding you have to start planning for the next and there's no time to do that, so give us two years, so that we can get on an even footing or we'll go and now we've gone, and I don't know if we'll come back. Hopefully, we'll come back, but that's what's happened to us, we're on precarious funding and now we can't function, because to get funding, we'd have to put in voluntary time, days and days of voluntary time to get the funding, again over and over and this is how the system works, so it's very, very frustrating!

SG: Yeah, there's a certain model of professionalisation, which assumes or demands that organisations will have, inherently, the skills and capacity to sustain fundraisers, or that should be an immediate goal of your organisation.

HJG: We want to, we want to professionalise. I want a fundraising manager. I'm happy to professionalise, that's how it works you know. We tried, but it's very slow and the more time you put into that, the less time you're making the art. Do you know what, every budget

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that every grassroots art organisation puts into Creative Scotland is a lie. The only way that you can deliver the art and build your organisation at the same time is to over promise and that means that you're going to overwork and you're going to work longer than you're paid for, and at some point, you break [laughs].

SG: Well, I remember, as I sort of mentioned in passing, I had a bit of a background in comedy which was primarily at the Fringe Festival and one year I came across the Fringe Society's guide to doing the festival, which has sample budgets in and they're sort of extraordinary, they haven't been updated for a while, but you can still find them on the Fringe website. What's extraordinary about them, there are lots of things that are just mind-boggling, but there's a little footnote right at the top which says, none of these budgets include wages or salaries.

HJG: [Laughs]. Right.

SG: So, their baseline for giving advice on how you calculate a realistic Fringe budget is saying first of all, you can't imagine that you're going to pay yourself. When I talk to students about models of Fringe festivals and developing their own work, I show them The Fringe Society advice and say, do you see anything that's a bit out of place here?

HJG: Then these organisations turn around and they're like, we're trying really hard to diversify and I just don't know why we're struggling so much to improve diversity in this organisation.

SG: The last thing I was interested in asking about was your sense of that broader sector because obviously your own work has toured both in other places in the UK and internationally. Do you have a sense that Scotland is hooked into that wider network or that it's relatively atomised? Because the more and more people I speak to, the more I've been getting different experiences understandably, and therefore different sort of perspectives.

HJG: I don't know, I work in multiple sectors and I've never been terribly successful in the live art sector, which is fine [laughs]. In literature, I know that we're extremely international and Scottish literature sells itself internationally very consistently and does pretty well doing that, and I've done pretty well out of that which is one reason that I'm focusing on writing at the moment. We are hooked in internationally and that's a big part of the strategy of literary support organisations. Theatre, I think through projects like Made In Scotland,

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through the British council there is also a bit of that, and I've benefited from that too in theatre. I think it's potentially a little bit less developed and strategic than in literature, but it's also way more expensive [laughs] so it's much harder to do and literature is a very cheap art form. Live art, I mean, there is no Scottish connection to UK live art apart from through Glasgow. I'm going to be pretty upfront, we've been banging on the door of the Live Art Development Agency and Live Art UK since its inception and the door has never opened, and we've tried to get the door open and every so often there's been a crack, and then every time they get new partners around the UK, they're in Glasgow, and sometimes multiple partners are in Glasgow and that's fine, the scene is better developed in Glasgow, there is more going on there, but if you can't even stretch across the central belt, how are you going to stretch across rural Scotland? And that's way more important than picking out up one random thing in Edinburgh, whatever. We're built around urban centres. The scene is built around urban centres. I do think live art has a chronic audience problem and a chronic image problem that is not that difficult to solve, just put it in more comfortable buildings and make it fun to go to. It is fun, I think it's fun.