

Live Art in Scotland: Stewart Laing

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Stephen Greer (SG): For the last few weeks I've been starting these conversations by asking people about their first encounters with performance and then maybe more specifically performance art, whether it was seeing it or studying it. I keep saying I'm wary of the neatness of origin stories, but I do like the idea of first encounters or strong memories, so maybe we can start there.

Stewart Laing (SL): It's interesting actually because Pamela Carter's been doing a long interview with me about my design work for The Envelope Room in Scotland, you know the group that lobbies for theatre design rights in Scotland? My first interest in theatre was theatre theatre, but it was the Citz in Glasgow in the mid-seventies and there was a show I saw called *Camino Real* by Tennessee Williams when I was maybe fourteen or fifteen years old. When I look back at it now, the aesthetic of it would very much fit in a more performance art context. A lot of the men were in drag, in fact I think all the women's parts were played by men. It was very big makeup, spangles and everything. I thought that's what theatre was, I thought oh wow, this is amazing. It's a bit like David Bowie and it's a bit like Lou Reed. That's what got me excited. Then my journey through art school and through the eighties was pretty much like straight theatre, but it was definitely the camp end of straight theatre that I was interested in. Actually, I think I was quite dismissive of the idea of performance art, any idea I had of performance art. I had an idea that it was self-indulgent. Towards the end of the eighties, Derek Jarman was part of The National Review of Live Art

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in Glasgow and we had friends in common. Derek and I worked together in that I made the exhibition for him, I mean it was all Derek's ideas, but at the workshops at the Citz, the design department actually made the exhibition for him and through that, I was hanging about at The National Review of Live Art at the Third Eye Centre and I got really interested in it. I really liked Nikki, I think she was intrigued by the fact that I wasn't interested in live art and I think she took that as a challenge and she invited me to see things. So then I got really into live art performance through The National Review of Live Art. Also, Neil Bartlett was part of that, he was the sort of host of the festival. I was seeing work of his, like *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* to Glasgow and *Sarrasine* came to Glasgow, so that was certainly a more performance end of theatre. Then when 1990 came and The Wooster Group were resident in Glasgow, I think that was maybe '89, that was the run up to the City of Culture. That post-dramatic view of theatre I find completely compelling. That sort of blew me away because I think that my interest up until that point had been really glossy, slightly unconventional versions of classic theatre, like Peter Stein, like the work they were doing at the Citz actually at that point. Yes, so I sort of feel like the whole live art thing came at me round about the same time, and seeing Gododdin at Tramway, seeing Brith Gof and then seeing Angus' work because I think Angus' work is definitely performance art I would say, it happens in the landscape, but it's performance. One of the things that absolutely amazed me about The Wooster Group, and it's something I talked to Liz LeCompte about, is that they do plays. That was what really excited me about getting to the point of The Wooster Group was that you could get the sensation of live art but you also got a Chekhov play or a Eugene O'Neill play. Liz absolutely identifies as a theatre director, if you ask her how she describes herself, she's a theatre director, she does plays. I think when I'm talking about the point where classic theatre and performance meet, I think for me The Wooster Group is definitely on that line. Frank Castorf, the work he was doing at the Volksbühne in Berlin, I think was this huge wave of post-dramatic theatre in Europe.

SG: As you were speaking, I was also thinking that when The Wooster Group were around, that's also the period where Goat Island was also visiting Glasgow for the first time. Did you come into contact with any of that work?

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SL: Yes, I saw some of it. I think I saw it later actually when The National Review of Live Art was at The Arches, I think that's when I first saw Goat Island in performance. Oh god, what's the famous English live art company?

SG: Forced Entertainment?

SL: That's the one, thank you. That's where I came across their work as well.

SG: Maybe we can just go back, it was so interesting hearing you describe those influences like Brith Gof and The Wooster Group. I was thinking about both the scale of that work, and the way in which it works, for me, with space, [and] particularly with The Wooster Group [how] it works with film and TV and video.

SL: Yes, technology. Very much so. I found that amazing, it's the first time I'd seen televisions on the stage and that was definitely exciting. I'm sort of overlapping in my interview with Pamela, but hey. I think that Liz's dramaturgy, she's not looking for the dramatic in the play. My understanding is that in America when she was a teenager, she realised you could channel hop, like literally channel hop when you're watching the television, and I think that's her dramaturgy. It's a completely opposite dramaturgy to who is this character at the beginning of the play, how does that character develop through the play and how is the character different at the end of the play? It's a very formal thing of doing something for three minutes until you're bored of it, and then clicking to a different way of doing it. I find that really exciting.

SL: I think Mike Pearson's talked about or written about the idea of multi-track dramaturgies in the work of Brith Gof, that sometimes it's the text that's doing the work, but sometimes it's the space, or it's some other element of the music score, and it's to do with the mixing of tracks. It's a parallel logic between channel hopping and track mixing.

SL: It's something that sort of bugs me with conventional dramatic theatre, dramaturgy, it feels very monolithic. It feels like it's based on a very specific set of ideas, and it doesn't have any, for instance, aesthetic attitudes to how performance might unfold itself.

SG: Before we move on, you mentioned the moment of Glasgow in 1990 which has a sort of semi-mythic status in Scottish history or in Glasgow's history. I know it was definitely a moment where a huge amount of money if nothing else came into different cultural projects in the city, both in the years leading up to it and also leaving a legacy afterwards.

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What's your recollection of that moment? Because lots of things come out of that. You know The Arches has its feet in 1990? What's your memory of that period?

SL: I mean it was very interesting and very exciting, but I think that also the reason I think Glasgow got the City of Culture was because it was a really cultured city, you know it wasn't as if they were looking at this wasteland and they thought, how do we inject culture into it? The National Review of Live Art was there and at that point the Citz was still doing really interesting work. I sort of feel it's more like the culmination of something rather than this is when everything started. I get a bit tired with the idea that exciting performance started in Glasgow post-1990. The Mahabharata came to Tramway in 1988, The Wooster Group came in 1989. It was all working towards 1990, but it's not like the gun went off in January 1990 and the arts in Glasgow changed.

SG: I'm conscious that you're working as a designer through this period and I'm thinking about when you started making or directing work. Would it have been at Tramway? Would it have been *The Homosexual*? Was that the first project you were the director of?

SL: Yes, actually I co-directed it with a friend of mine who was an actor called Gerrard McArthur and actually one of your questions was about institutions that I felt were supporting my practice. It was absolutely one hundred per cent Steve Slater's years of programming at Tramway. I mean it was Tramway that I knew I could go to with an idea and however tenuous the idea was, I think they had an idea that they were investing in artists rather than the specific ideas of artists so they were very open to whatever you would take to them.

SG: I'm sort of conscious that a major part of Tramway's profile, both then and now, was the fact that it had a huge gallery space, so there wasn't just the theatre space in the form of Tramway 1 but there was a visual arts programme, a really high profile one actually feeding into it at the same time. Was that part of your encounter as a venue that sort of programming is part of that conversation of those two domains?

SL: Oh yes. Completely. You know seeing amazing theatre in the gallery space, it's a real pity how they seem so separated now. The black space and the white space, it feels like there's very little interaction. I remember one year Nikki programmed The National Review of Live Art in the big gallery space and it was just amazing. I think there were three groups working

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there in a durational piece at one time, and also Keni did his James Joyce project, there was one of those that happened in the gallery space. It's very exciting. Actually *The Homosexual* was programmed in the gallery space as well, they built like a little [inaudible].

SG: Okay. I found a letter from around the time when there were plans in place that Scottish Ballet would take over that space and it would flip from being a performance space into rehearsal studios and that plan was ultimately abandoned. But I found a letter that you'd written maybe to The List or a newspaper, saying how essential that space had been to your practice.

SL: Oh my god! [Laughs] Yes, that's interesting. I can't even remember writing that letter, but yes, great.

SG: I'll see if I can find it [laughs].

SL: Yes, if you want to send me a link to it, that would be great. Tramway is really close to my heart actually and the fact that Take Me Somewhere sort of has a permanent home there, I think is fantastic.

SG: I'm just thinking about some of the works that you've staged at Tramway, maybe this leads us into talking about just your work and how it's developed and some of the relationships in it as well. There was the J G Ballard sequence, which was staged at Tramway, if I've got my notes right, that's *Myths of the Near Future: The Enormous Space* and *The Drowned Giant*, and I've got it in my head that *The Drowned Giant* was in that Tramway too, was in that space?

SL: It's weird because Steve commissioned that piece just before Tramway was renovated and the period where we were meant to do our development, Tramway wasn't available to us so we ended up doing everything off-site in sort of site-specific spaces, so actually *The Drowned Giant* we originally made and performed in a shop in the high street, but it used architectural models of Tramway 2. So the idea was always to invent a project that was going to happen but taking advantage of the fact that we all knew it wasn't going to happen, so it was a sort of model presentation for a project that we knew was impossible to stage at Tramway. Then when we did all three projects together, we did that project on the balcony, which at that point was open and looked over Tramway 2 so that people could look at the model boxes and look at the space at the same time, which was nice, it was really great.

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SG: That answers a question I had, because I'd worked out that the other two pieces, *The Myths of Near Future* was staged at Govan Swimming Pool or Govan Baths?

SL: Yes.

SG: The enormous space had been staged in a suburban semi, and I was going to ask you about that choice not realising that it was very pragmatic reasons!

SL: Yes, that wasn't part of the original plan, it was really us either postponing the project by nine months or sort of taking advantage of it. So when Tramway reopened we did *Myths of the Near Future* and *The Drowned Giant* at Tramway, but we still did the enormous space in the suburban house in Craigmarloch.

SG: Am I right in thinking that you're working with Pamela Carter on those or does that relationship start later with *Slope*?

SL: It was with *Slope*, yes.

SG: So how did that original relationship with Pamela come about, do you recall?

SL: I sort of met Pamela around Glasgow, the art scene, the performing arts scene in Glasgow was quite small. I never really felt we clicked, but then at one point I was directing an opera in Sweden and Pamela had some money from the Scottish Arts Council to observe some different directors, some different artists who she was interested in, and she asked me if she could come to Sweden and watch me direct this opera. I knew at that point she was just starting to write with Selma Dimitrijevic, I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing her name right. So yes, I asked her if she was interested in writing this play which was a sort of crazy, definitely a post-dramatic idea in that I had an idea for a set and I asked her if she'd be interested in writing something that might fit in that set. It was weird because I knew Pamela was working on the CPP course at that point, I think she lectured in History or Performance and I thought that she was going to come up with something that was a bit more cut and paste but actually she wrote this three-act play and we all loved the three-act play, so we did this three-act play called *Slope*.

SG: The design of it is a kind of sunken playing area with the audience.

SL: On a slope [laughs].

SG: [Laughs] In a literal slope, yes.

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SL: That's absolutely what the title of the project is. In a lot of ways it was about disability access. The original idea was to do this play in T4 actually, to build a room and then just have a row of chairs round the top of it so people could look into the room from the top. But it was Tramway who said, actually, if you do that you need to provide disabled access, so we couldn't do it in T4 and then we tried to make it fit in T1, and again because of the gradients of slopes that are practical for wheelchair users, the only way we could do it was to do the full length of T2, so that is how that came about.

SG: I'm a real sucker for the way the material conditions of making something push back on what the show is.

SL: Oh completely, completely. Yes, I think that's really exciting as well.

SG: I'm conscious that this is also a show where you working with Nick Millar, had you worked with him previously or was that the first time you worked with him as well?

SL: No, he worked on the J G Ballard project, and he worked on the Herve Guibert play we had adapted, the book *Blindsight*. So Nick is my longest collaborator with Untitled Projects. He's been there. I think he told me he missed a project, but if I was to sit here and think which project that Nick wasn't about for I just can't imagine which one it was.

SG: How did that relationship start?

SL: We needed a production manager and we just asked about. I don't even know who suggested Nick but Nick came along and it was just a really exciting conversation. He's much more than a production manager.

SG: What's the more? [Laughs] What else is he?

SL: I think it's interesting that Nick has an independent practice as an artist and Mike Brooks who we often work with as a lighting designer has an independent project as an artist. You're employing somebody as a production manager and you're employing somebody as a lighting designer, but actually what you're getting is a group of artists having a conversation about a project.

SG: Maybe we can talk a little bit about the origins of the company, when did Untitled start?

SL: It started in 1998. I'd directed a few things by that point. I directed *The Homosexual* which was a sort of crazy experience and then I directed some plays at the Citz as well. I

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think I wanted to make work that wasn't reliant on what an institution was asking of me in the work that I was making. At that point I'd just designed a musical on Broadway so I just earned an awful lot of money, and I thought the only way I could artistically justify going off and designing a musical on Broadway was to somehow use that as a sort of starter for making theatre. I used my own money, I employed a producer, and lottery funding had just opened up to the performing arts at the Scottish Arts Council. The other thing that I think I thought was that most of the work I'd done up until that point was the play, it started off as a play, so whatever you do with the play, you know that you sit down on the first day of rehearsals and you speak these words and I just thought life for me might be more interesting if we sat down and have a series of images, to sit down in rehearsal with images and make the work out of that. I think that all of the Untitled Projects have a literary source. There's absolutely a text that is a starting point, the way that you arrange that text dramatically and how you make pictures on a stage felt completely liberating to me to not be sort of bogged down by what Samuel Beckett thought you should be looking at.

SG: I was nearly going to say it's not an art practice of literary adaptation, but I suppose it still is, it's just not treating that work of literature as a sort of set of truth conditions for what the work should be.

SL: Yes, exactly. I think that's a really good way of putting it. I think that *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* is a really good example of that. It's sort of thinking, yes we want to look at this Scottish classic. To find a way of making theatre out of that, that is not narratively and dramaturgically plodding through that novel and picking out your favourite bits.

SG: Yes, so that's a work that I know has had a few different lives or versions of it. One during the International Festival and the original version at Tramway, I don't know if it's had other stagings? I guess from my memory [of the work, it has] two major parts or two movements or certainly two spaces, a performance lecture presentation by an actor telling us the story of having worked with Paul Bright and then a kind of museum exhibition space which is full of a ephemera or artefacts from Paul Bright's work.

SL: Yes. Actually, it all came about that I had this idea that I wanted to make a project that just existed as a fake archive. At one point the idea was we were going to talk to the V&A in London to see if we could put just a box into the theatre archive, and people could just go in and book this box the way you can go to a theatre archive and book to see anything, and it

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sort of expanded out of that really. Just with a fascination and interest in archive, and then when Pamela came into it, at first, I thought I would just do a talk round the exhibition and it would be open at a certain time each night and I would do a gallery talk, but then Pamela got more interested in the dramatic possibilities of actually working with an actor so it sort of grew. On that project we were working with Jack Wrigley and Robbie Thompson who were part of 85A, and 85A were very much a performance art collective. They came out of Glasgow School of Art, and they were much, much younger than us and had these sort of insane ideas that we might have had and then dismissed very quickly but they were just so sort of young and enthusiastic, they were like, no we can do this, we can make this work. I think that project owed an awful lot to 85A and that very irreverent way of making performance that they had been doing around Glasgow for the previous few years.

SG: It was sort of gorgeous coming into it, I had just moved back to Scotland when I saw the version at Tramway: sitting in the middle of a really gorgeous conjuring trick but also having the sense of, did I miss something while I was away? I'd lived in Scotland since the late nineties [and] it was like is there a chapter of Scottish performance that I'd missed. So I think that was what was really lovely about it, that it was so plausible.

SL: There was an awful lot of it that was really rooted in truth. A lot of it was Keni [Davidson]. Keni had been doing these adaptations.

SG: The James Joyce, was it *Ulysses*?

SL: Yes, I think it was *Ulysses*. He was doing different chapters in different spaces. He did one up a hill, he did one at Tramway. So a lot of that was Keni, a sort of love letter to that mad, self-destructive creativity that Keni had, and also at that point was being really marginalised for.

SG: I was interested to hear that in one of the early images of what the work might be that you had imagined it would be an installation, or a museum space, and you would give the museum tour a few times. I made the immediate connection then to your presence on stage in *Them!* which is the National Theatre of Scotland show. Is *Them!* the only piece where you've appeared on stage in your works?

SL: No, in *The Drowned Giant* I presented *The Drowned Giant*. In *Blindsight* I introduced *Blindsight*, I sort of set it up, and then in *The Salon Project*, I was sort of at the centre of *The*

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Salon Project with Rose English. It's a bit of a compulsion of mine actually, it gives me a buzz. I really like being in the dressing room area with the actors. I just think that gives you a completely different energy about what a piece of theatre is. Actually, *The Maids* isn't Untitled Projects, but I think in terms of post-dramatic performances and live art, I think that's as close as I've got to it in a conventional theatre space. I went on every night and did a Q&A with the audience to cover a scene change and I really liked that as well. I think, interestingly, that more formal playing in *Them!* I didn't enjoy as much. I prefer it when it's sort of throwaway rather than it being like a sort of structured thing.

SG: You appear as a version of yourself in a very tightly structured way. I was also just thinking about the rest of the cast of that show, because Rosina Bonsu was in it as well, someone who has a background as a choreographer and a dance maker, but not necessarily as a theatre performer.

SL: I'm really interested in working with people who don't necessarily have traditional drama school backgrounds. Like Rose English, like working with Rose on *The Salon Project*, that was amazing.

SL: What's the appeal of working with someone who doesn't have that background, or who has a different background?

SL: Drama schools are so generic in a way, even if they have slight differences in their approach. I think drama schools are all teaching some version of Stanislavski which is 'here's my character at the beginning of the play, here's my character at the end of the play, and if they're both the same, then somehow drama has failed'. I just think it's really interesting working with people who come to performance to inhabiting that space in front of an audience who actually have no interest in the development of a character from one end of a thing to another, I just think it's really exciting. Actually I got that working with Adrian in *The Homosexual* and working with Leigh in *The Homosexual*, I mean god, we wouldn't have known how to start a conversation about character development in that show, or indeed with Ivan who came from a drag background.

SG: When we were emailing and setting up this conversation, you suggested to me that a lot of the theatre work that you make might sit in a space between conventional theatre and live art. I'm wondering whether that interest in character or presence or persona that isn't

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about a Stanislavskian narrative of development, is one of the meeting points of live art, that live art perhaps does persona and does presence more often than it does character.

SL: Yes, and I'm really interested in who that person is and how they can skew who they are to present something on stage. I think that's what you mean by persona, isn't it? I mean if you're going to ask Adrian to be in a play, you don't want him to reinvent himself as something that is unrelated to Adrian, because the reason you're asking Adrian to be in a play is because you want a bit of that in your play. I think a lot of the time that is my approach to conventional casting actually. It's not about auditioning somebody and thinking oh wow, they could really turn themselves into this character. I think it is about, does this person have qualities that they can skew their personality and be interesting in that space in front of an audience.

SG: I remember seeing Adrian in Tim Crouch's play *The Author*.

SL: Oh yes.

SG: And I didn't know Adrian at all well at that moment, but in hindsight thinking about how much of what you were just describing there was maybe ringing true in that particular fit between character and performer.

SL: Yes.

SG: The conversations that I often have with younger artists [during this project], I think it actually cuts across different generations, is a sense of enormous loss around The National Review of Live Art, [and] the ending of The National Review of Live Art sometimes gets folded into the closure of the host production company. The two things were actually separate episodes, if you like. I suppose I'm interested in your sense of what the scene has been like in that moment since, because it feels like there was a period where the ecology of live art in Scotland was really dominated in healthy and sometimes slightly unhealthy ways by The National Review, with The National Review being expected to do all things for all people because it was the biggest player.

SL: Yes.

SG: [And then] in the period after it, where other organisations, perhaps including The Arches, sort of reconfigured what they were doing slightly to step into the gap.

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SL: Yes. That's the way I've always looked at it, and also, I think there's another thing which is the CPP course. That filled the gap as well. This thing that came together that was live art in Scotland, The National Review of Live Art was part of it, but I think it was also the CPP course. That was hugely influential and all these younger artists who are then thinking, oh wow, this is a thing, I can express myself in this way. I've never sat down and done a timeline of it, but I remember The Arches was already programming that type of work when the NRLA folded, you know when New Moves folded.

SG: Yeah because Jackie had taken over as Artistic Director and Arches Live! had already gone in a direction and Behaviour, I can't remember what was the first year Behaviour started. I think you're right that that was the direction of travel of what the venue was doing.

SL: And also I think the thing Jackie did at The Arches, maybe by necessity, is that it was so focused on homegrown work. A lot of the artists were living and working in Glasgow, whereas I think The National Review of Live Art had a little bit of that, but it had people coming from all other, it had Goat Island, it had Forced Entertainment. It had the amazing European dance that Nikki was bringing. I think that was a big part of it, but by that point, Tramway were producing work like that outside of the NRLA.

SG: I guess the final thing is your sense of that wider horizon. I know that you have presented *Justified Sinner* as part of the International programme. I have conversations where people are very conflicted about the sense of the Fringe as a space where you might take live art or you might take experimental performance if for nothing else because of the constraints of time and space that go with the Fringe.

SL: I've always felt very uncomfortable with the Fringe actually. I think I've shown work maybe once at the Fringe. I find that thing of not owning the space really difficult. The fact that your set disappears, you can't go in two hours earlier and have a conversation with your performers. The Fringe just makes me anxious as a way of performing work. I've seen lots of interesting things at the Fringe but for me personally, I don't like my set disappearing for eighteen hours of the day and coming out for four. It just makes me nervous.