

## Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie

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Stephen Greer (SG): What led up to Body Parts, how did you come to that idea for that project?

Kate Downie (KD): Well, I had been president of the SSA [Society of Scottish Artists] in the two years before that in 2004 and 2005. One of the best things about the SSA is that every year for a long time they have an invited country of artists that they bring in. The year before we'd had a big project which I curated as president and convener of that exhibition; a project called To See Ourselves As Others See Us, taken from Burns. One of the most exciting things that happened in that project was inviting a Scottish sculptor called Aeneas Wilder to bring over three Indian artists, one of who was Indian installation and performance artist and two Bollywood billboard painters who he worked with. They made giant Bollywood posters and Aeneas worked with these guys in Bangalore, which was the centre of that film industry at the time, and then they came over. They stayed with me because we were all broke all the time and they created this massive billboard outside the RSA. The painters had never seen the sea before, they'd never left Bangalore before, and they were illiterate. They were taken to the Scottish Portrait Gallery where they looked at portraits of Bonnie Prince Charlie and Flora Macdonald and they had tiny little photocopies of them and they created giant billboards of them and then they had holes cut out where their faces were and people could climb behind and put themselves into the picture and it was so mind boggling. We collaborated with Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop to set it up. It

## Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie

was just extraordinary; it was so participative and so performative. I'm a painter, but I have always used performance or aspects of performance throughout my work from a long time ago and it's always closer to my practice than people who know me as a painter understand. From there I thought we can't stop, so that's where the idea that there should be a platform for performance came from. I'd been so involved with the SSA that I knew a lot of people who were desperate to find a platform. There were sculptors, installation artists, painters, muralists, there was so much going on, but there was no platform outside of the National Review of Live Art in Glasgow, which had a very international kind of menu. That was great, but there was no interim place for people to try things out with an informed, respectful, and interested audience who weren't drinking wine and talking over them. That's why I decided to do it.

SG: So, it came out of your own interest and a need and desire from the people who were members of SSA.

KD: Yes. My major performance when I was younger was stopping the traffic in Paris by sitting in the middle of a road dressed as a child and playing with toy cars. It created a three-mile tailback round the Place de la Bastille, and I managed to escape before I got arrested. There is something in my genes about disruption and deviancy, especially when I was younger. It just felt like I had to make a place. I had not become that artist, by this point I was a single parent having to provide for two children. It wasn't easy [laughs].

SG: How did the collaboration with the Royal Scottish Academy then come about?

KD: That was a really interesting one. First of all, the RSA and the National Galleries by this time under George Wyllie's watch had changed over, so we didn't have jurisdiction to do what we liked to the building and certainly not to do this performance thing. So, the only way it could happen in a central venue, because people kept saying oh, you could do it in a wee primary school on the outskirts of town and I said no, it's got to be an SSA project. It had to become a collaboration. I already knew and had worked with Colin before he went to the RSA and he was then the exhibitions organiser, so I went to him with my idea, and I wrote letters. In those days you had to write letters [laughs]. I wrote formal letters to the secretary, to the administrator, to him, and then Colin really warmed to the idea and he

## Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie

massively facilitated it. It became the two of us against the world. I had the absolute backing of the council for the SSA. They were completely behind it and part of the enabling as well. Then we had to get permission from the National Galleries of Scotland. I think they didn't really quite realise what we were going to get up to. There was no history to say no, put it that way, Steve. So, they said yes.

SG: [Laughs].

KD: The president of the RSA at the time was Ian McKenzie Smith. Ian used to be the ex-director of the Aberdeen Art Gallery, which he ran in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. He ran a very avant-garde place; it was a little island of culture when I was growing up. You saw weird and wonderful performances and minimalist jazz and all sorts of really interesting stuff that when you were a teenager you wouldn't see anywhere else. He just said yes and he's still alive but he's not young. Ian said ask the green room, you can use my president's office, which was wonderful because we had to have a backstage and that was it.

SG: [Laughs].

KD: You can imagine. We had performance artists from all over the place changing, stripping off, putting cling film all over their bodies, shaving bits of them off. There was a row of RSA gowns all hanging up and just slightly above our heads through all this chaos and mess was a priceless Audubon painting. The worlds were amazingly colliding in ways you couldn't have imagined. I was completely thrilled. I was so excited that it was happening, it gave me so much pleasure.

SG: That sounds brilliant. Can you remember how the programme came together? I'm conscious of the SSA as a member-led organisation, so people propose work but you also programme or curate works. What was the approach?

KD: It was a combination, especially the first one. I think we got a tiny bit of funding. Although, there is no Scottish Arts Council or Creative Scotland logo on it, so I think we pulled the money from scrabble, a bit from the RSA and so on. The only budget we really had was to pay the performers. There may have been a small food budget because all the performers stayed with members of the SSA. We all put them up, so that's how we did it. It

## Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie

was a kind of wish list of people that I really wanted to have, and I knew Alastair MacLennan a bit, so I could ask Alastair. Alastair and George were my star turns at the lecture theatre and that was amazing. Then Billy Cowie as well, he was wonderful. We had these great people. Lisa Keiko Kirton did the most amazing, unforgettable, participative performance which I'll tell you about later. So, I had a few people up my sleeve, and then we simply did a call out and advertised and it went out across the UK, and we were inundated. We'd obviously touched a nerve; people were desperate for a platform to perform. The thing is, because we were so low-budget and because it was happening in the RSA, the National Galleries were very specific that we couldn't plug anything in, we couldn't have massive electrics, and Colin and I didn't want that either. We wanted it to come back to the sense of the human body, hence Body Parts. It's like an Eric Clapton unplugged, the whole idea was that it was keeping it really simple, and that it was about the body and props and so on. It wasn't like the live arts thing which had a much bigger budget and some very dramatic and extraordinary installations and electronics. This was so low-tech it was unbelievable, but for me that made it very special and intimate.

SG: It's interesting that there's a happy meeting point of a particular tradition of the live body performer and the environment that you were working in, in that one enabled and maybe required the other.

KD: Yes, yes. I would have loved to carry it on, but it was a lot of work [laughs]. We advertised because as the SSA we're an open submission organisation, we have members, but we have open submission and it's very rigorous, it's really hard to get in. Two years before that, I set up SSA on film where we had video submissions and that was very popular and I think I had come across a lot of performance art on video, and we made a video programme and strung them all together to make an eight-hour loop. I thought no one is going to sit through all these films and every single time I came into the gallery, people were locked into this world. This was all completely new for me. Having done that, I'd seen that there was a lot of performance and that a lot of people put films in of their performances because they didn't have the platform to actually perform in a gallery or elsewhere. People submitted and the SSA council went through it, which is about eight people. We looked at every single film. Some submissions were just a single perfect idea on an A4 sheet of paper, that was all it was.

## Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie

SG: So, it was you and the council and Colin, that's how you put the programme together? To pick up where we paused there, you were saying that the programme was put together with you and Colin and the council.

KD: I don't think Colin had any hand in selection. He was very trusting and he knew that the SSA were taking the risks and had initiated the idea and we had a division of labour. I think I presented him with the shortlist. It was fascinating because there was a lot of student work from Dartington. Some of it was pretty ropey, some of it was worth the punt, but it was very interesting. I didn't come from a performance training background at all, so I learnt where the pockets of teaching and performance were coming from and that was a real learning curve. My ex-husband, we'd split up by then, worked as an ensemble theatre company. He was one of the directors. So, I was very used to live performance, which was useful. I didn't mistake anything that was happening for theatre, but it had upped the ante about that place where they come together, what you could see through conceptually and so on. The best live performance art is where the presence of the performer and the conception of the action are perfect.

SG: Maybe we can talk a little bit about the programme itself. There were a few years of work. I know that obviously in the first year, there were a few people that you've already mentioned: Billie Cowie, George Wyllie, and Alastair MacLennan, Wyllie and MacLennan giving performance or performative lectures and you mentioned Lisa Keiko Kirton's piece called *Outside In*. What was the form of that, what do you remember?

KD: I remember every minute of it. Lisa is a Japanese woman married to a Scottish oil worker. She trained as a mature student at Gray's School of Art, but she never made work quite like other people. Her proposal and what we accepted was actually a school's group thing, but I participated and so did lots of visitors to the gallery. Upstairs in the traditional galleries was the main show and it was Visual Arts Scotland and the SSA. We had a group of about twenty or thirty people who were just normal visitors who'd signed up to be part of it and some school children. We had some dressing rooms downstairs and Lisa asked everybody to take their clothes off and to turn them inside out and then put them back on, and to take your shoes and keep your socks on, and then to take all your pockets and open them up and have them hanging out. All the possessions that you own and everything that

## Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie

was in your pockets was put into plastic bags and safety-pin-attached so that absolutely everything was reversed. Then she took everybody upstairs in their socks and women had all the contents of their handbags attached all over their bodies and it was the most transcendental experience looking at an exhibition in your socks in a group of thirty people with this immense kindness because people are exposed and softened by their willingness to invert themselves. She is a very gentle person. I don't remember what she did, I think she just guided people through, and we became the performers. We attracted a lot of attention, but we stayed in this beautiful bubble of our self-knowledge. It was just one of the most subtle and clever things to do with an audience of art. It made you look at the art entirely differently because of how you approached it.

SG: That's beautiful. I found a review of Body Parts that year which referred in tiny detail to the living sculptures in her work but offered no more of what the work was about, so that's beautiful to hear.

KD: It was absolutely transcendental. I'll never forget it. I was lucky because I got to do everything [laughs]. I was there for every minute of it, and it was my gift to myself. That was Lisa. Everybody else was submission, there were people like Firebird. Do you know Anthony Schrag?

SG: Yes, I actually spoke to him last week.

KD: Ah! Well Anthony was still a postgraduate at Glasgow School of Art when he did that and he came with two or three other very bendy friends and they just scrabbled like wonderful acrobatic rats round the outside and the inside of the building. Anthony was one of the people who I think had done a performance the year before at the opening and then submitted this whole thing and that was wonderful. People loved it so much. The big stone staircase, it was so transgressive and sensitive as well. They climbed right up the columns and suspended themselves with no props and just their bodies. That was really quite amazing.

SG: I think I've seen one photograph, as you describe, suspended between two pillars at the front of the building. It might actually be Anthony. Now I've met him I need to go back and have a closer look at that image.

## Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie

KD: There were two men and a woman, I think.

SG: He might have come back in one of the later Body Parts.

KD: He's done two. There was other stuff that went on. He definitely performed more than once for the SSA.

SG: There was a piece of his called *Mistake of Vision*, which I think was at the RSA, which was a piece where he rigged gallery walls and ceilings to topple at you or drop suddenly when you walked underneath them. I'll send you a link after this as you might recognise it.

KD: I think it might have been that by the time I'd done all this stuff, I'd probably retreated back to my own practice. I might have missed one [laughs]. Beagles & Ramsay was interesting.

SG: Yes, that's the one that has had the most sensationalist press attached to it.

KD: God, they were such pains in the arse. They really were. It was very funny coming as an artist in my own right. I had my own reputation; I had my own practice. To encounter people like that, who were very known in performance worlds and had much cooler everything than someone like me, I found that they were very much part of that Glasgow thing. I know that Sam Ainsley taught them and knows them well and thinks they're wonderful, but they were difficult and contentious. We said yes okay, black pudding made of your own blood. That was kind of icky, but fascinating. They were going to fry them up inside the RSA. I think the news got out from the press release, but I suspect that one of them made sure that the press knew, and it was very difficult because the health and safety people came in. They were going to offer it to people and of course, people would just refuse, and they did do it, but we almost got closed down. It was very scary because I came face to face with the official City of Edinburgh Council powers that be. Then, the RSA and the National Galleries went from being very okay with it to not supporting me. That is the environment. It's amazing how much we did get away with it, but that happened. They were so arrogant. I did come across it, especially with a lot of male performers, once I'd assumed the role of facilitator and curator, I was like some kind of paid dogsbody and that was quite stressful. I was so used to having my own status as an artist or as the president of the RSA

## Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie

and suddenly I was having to have meetings with health and safety people and assuage them. They were really playing hard to get. Total primadonnas. I had a few moments like that [laughs].

SG: I bet. It's interesting to think about that shift of being an artist and a curator and the president, to becoming the production manager of a festival.

KD: Exactly! I volunteered, but to be honest, I had no experience. I think the reason I had two such great festivals was that I had Colin and Elise, who worked for the RSA. She was amazing and she was the one who helped pull the brochures together. At the end of the performances, her and I were out there sweeping and cleaning up the rubbish. She was so into it and amazing. We had a good team and loads of SSA volunteers.

SG: Glorious. There are few other works in the second year that I was fascinated by, and I don't know again whether you've got any recollection of them. There was a work by Angela Bartram called *Tonguing*. I think she ended up doing a PhD about the transgress of mouth in live art. It was a work where I think she'd made a reproduction of a human tongue which was then mounted on the wall of the gallery. I think that work was staged in a few different places.

KD: Yes, she snogged the wall with a sugar tongue for ages. She would stand back and it was bright red with a lot of red dye in it, and it was attached to the wall, which was just a plain white, perfect wall in the Finlay Room. The tongue had a bolt, it was very cleverly made. It was a cast tongue with sugar screwed in so that it was just a tongue sticking out of the wall and she approached it and just started snogging the wall. Then she'd step back and you could see the red dye around her face. Then she would launch herself at it. It was quite durational. That was pretty cool. She had presented a film the year before, where she was kissing her Alsatian dog and the dog was licking her and that was quite hard. She's good on transgression, she's great. I'd like to tell you the story of probably the most amazing and extraordinary transgressive moment in the whole of the thing. It was done by an art student and her name was, and I'll never forget this, Gillian Taylor. There were so many good performances, but Gillian Taylor, *The Art of Violence* – can you see that? If you look carefully at Sunday 19<sup>th</sup>, this is the second one, it says 1pm lunchtime reception and discussion at the



## Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie

RSA library. That whole lunchtime reception discussion was a complete reuse to create the atmosphere within which she created her performance. Gillian was a final year art student at Edinburgh College of Art. She was in her late twenties, working class, trained as a policewoman and then decided that art was her thing. She left the police and her family were horrified. During her time as a policewoman, she encountered a huge amount of violent in very rough parts of Edinburgh. When she was training to become an artist she discovered the RSA, and although she'd lived in Edinburgh all her life, she'd never been in the gallery. She had work in the odd show and she'd be surrounded by the Edinburgh people drinking wine and she could not put that with the world that she knew where she was helping to break up fights outside pubs. So, people are still drinking, but the Saturday night drinking was in an entirely different place. She wanted to shift what she knew into a place that she didn't know, but to marry these different parts of the city together. She had a bunch of pals who she used as stunt fighters. We had everyone chatting just like I described to you, and there was a huge buzz from the festival, there were all sorts of people. It was a really diverse audience, way more diverse than you'd get in Glasgow because everyone wanted to be part of it. You had the curious, middle-class, white people who were used to buying paintings and then you had everyone who was obsessed with performance and teenagers. Everyone was there and trying to catch the bad free wine and then, in the middle of all this, this argument broke out. We knew who the actors were, but nobody else did. The SSA members and the volunteers didn't, only me and the artist knew. It had to be like that. I knew that there was going to be an almighty fight breaking out in the middle of this crowded gallery. They were absolutely brilliant. The glasses got smashed and then the space cleared and there was absolute horror. They were so good, it looked incredibly real. We sort of hustled them out. I think Colin knew as well and we had to get them out. The atmosphere, this had never happened in the RSA before. She was so brave in doing it, she was incredibly nervous about whether it would work or not. Then, the actual conversation about performance took place after that and it was an incredible discussion after that had happened. I was so proud when we managed to pull off something as difficult as that in a place like that. I really defended and felt vindicated that you need those kinds of performance actions inside places like that. The Arches is amazing, but if something happened like that at the Arches, no one would be in the least surprised [laughs]. There was that power of contrast, I guess.

## Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie

SG: That links perfectly to what I was going to ask about your sense of where the RSA and the SSA sit in that larger landscape. I'm conscious that Body Parts was programmed just after, or just slightly overlapping, the National Review of Live Art by accident or by design, I don't know.

KD: I must tell you a story about that. Is it Nikki Millican?

SG: Yes.

KD: Well, I phoned her up because I knew nothing about programming anything and said you don't know me, but my name is etc., I've been to loads of your stuff and what you do is incredible. Anyway, we're doing this thing, and I didn't even know exactly when it was. I came off the phone shaking, she basically shouted down the phone because she'd heard about it. She said, do you know nothing about a clash diary. What's a clash diary? [laughs] I know nothing! Those were the dates we were offered, and it was like go for it or not. I kind of pulled myself up because I was so horrified with her hostility. She was unbelievably hostile, very angry, she was not in the least bit helpful, she thought that it was a terrible mistake having something like live art in somewhere like the RSA, she thought we were just playing at it. I felt very diminished. I still love what she does. I phoned Alastair MacLennan and said, oh god. He said, no, no, I'm coming. He said, don't pay any attention, it'll be great. He was so supportive, and I thought, just do it, what's the worst that can happen. I tried to tell her that it's allowed to happen in other places. It would be like saying there's an exhibition on in Glasgow, therefore you can't have an exhibition in Edinburgh. It was so stupid.

SG: One of the things that has been interesting to me is trying to work out where live art and performance art has been happening in Scotland, given that it is a relatively small country where a lot of action seems to be focussed on Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Dundee as you might imagine. I suppose I'm thinking about the legacy of that work [as] your time as president came to a close and, as you said, you went back to focus on your own practice. Do you have a sense that live art, performance art, or performance installations still have a presence in the work of the Society of Scottish Artists? I'm trying to trace where festivals

have had later consequences and that might be quite indirect such as making something possible.

KD: I think with the artists themselves that participated, I realise a lot of them have gone on to do some really interesting stuff. One of the SSA invited artists for performance the year before Body Parts was Alberta Whittle. Now we've invited her to be proposed as an academician which would liven things up somewhat. She did an amazing performance down in Leith. We had loads of outreach stuff happening and she did her pure-bred mongrel thing, which was incredible. As a single parent, I just had to drag my kids to everything. Alberta still remembers me taking my daughter to a performance. I spoke to her the other day, which was very nice, or email-spoke. People like Rachel Maclean, I selected her from her degree show as an invited artist. We have a huge list of people who came through the SSA first. The live art project was simply like that, you gave people a platform. The most powerful thing that we did was once people were invited, we didn't have much money, but we supported them every single inch of the way. Apart from some of the trickier egos, I really loved doing that and everyone in the SSA loved it. People loved having strange artists living in their house. We had two amazing Norwegian women. Scylla and Charybdis. Have you heard of Rita Hartung, she's an amazing performance artist from Bergen? There were a lot of women fighting. They were black belt judo artists and performance artists, and lecturers in Bergen. They fought all over the place. They were in their judo outfits, and they spent about an hour pulling each other over and throwing each other down. It was almost like the rock and the hard place, they performed this with grunts, there was no speech at all. We provided this utterly committed audience for people to try things out on. I think the SSA went on to do a lot of performances, but it became more of the ecology. I think that's all. Unfortunately, we didn't get funding because Creative Scotland didn't think we deserved it because we were a royal institution, even though we were broke. I think as an artist I wasn't that good at writing applications, but I thought we'll just do it anyway.

SG: I think that sensibility, or that impulse, is turning up in quite a lot of the conversations that I'm having. The Live Art Development Agency, which is UK-wide but based in England and paid for by Arts Council England or predominantly funded by them, do support some organisations in Scotland. Scotland has never had an institutional home or lead organisation for live art, and I think that has had implications for what gets funded and what doesn't.

## **Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie**

KD: Maybe you could start one.

SG: Yes, well we'll see if anyone trusts me after I've finished this project [laughs].

Historically, lots of the money has come from dance budgets, which is really interesting to me.

KD: For me, it was so not going to be dance. There were quite a lot of submissions which were really boring dancing. I love good contemporary dance, but it wasn't live art performance. A lot of the younger artists were confused with that. Although I wasn't an experienced producer of festivals, I had been an artist and had lived in a world with performers sleeping on our floor half of the time and I knew a lot of performance artists. I had followed stuff forever and I didn't need anyone to tell me what was going to work. I absolutely trusted my instincts on who could go in. I had no anxiety, you could see what was good art and what was bad art in the same way as you can with a painting, I think.

SG: That's almost a perfect place to wrap up.

KD: God, that's terrible.

SG: I think it's that intuition or that instinct, which is also borne of study and experience. Again, it's something that's recurring in conversations with producers, curators, programmers, and artists. It's that question, why do you like the art that you like, and it's a mix of all of those things.

KD: I truly believe that live performance has the ability to alter the equation of how you look at the world. Theatre can do that at times. Peter Brook probably gets close to that place between them somehow. I think live art can do things that cannot be done in any other way and that's where the power is.

SG: I was taking part in an online conversation event a few weeks ago. It was introduced by someone else and I was hosting it. The format was the person introducing it always asks the host a question and I was asked why I was interested in theatre and performance. I said I always have a different answer and I said probably got into it because I'm looking for a conversion experience, I'm looking for an encounter with something which changes the way

## **Live Art in Scotland: Kate Downie**

I feel about the world, or what's possible in the world, which is a really high order to demand of art, but that's the space that live art lives in for me.

KD: When I was in my twenties, I lived in Holland for a year and had a studio there which was courtesy of the arts council. I came back and I moved to Edinburgh, and I went to the Third Eye Centre where Alastair MacLennan was doing a performance that lasted forty-eight hours. I kept coming back to it and spending time in it and going away and coming back to it. I was so mesmerised by how he moved. You know that thing about concentration, when the performers are so concentrated, the audience has to respond with a similar intensity.