

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

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

The following is an 'intelligent verbatim' transcript that is intended to be an accurate record which omits some small, repeated phrases or false starts (where someone has spoken and then rephrased themselves) for readability. Text presented in [square brackets] has been added during transcription to clarify meaning and/or to include details offered by the interviewee(s) during the review process.

For further details of this process and guidance on conditions of use, please visit the Live Art in Scotland project website: <https://liveartscotland.org/index.php/about-the-las-collection/>

Stephen Greer (SG): I've been starting these conversations in the same way for the last few weeks to find a rhythm or to find the edges of the project. I've been talking to people about their first encounters with performance, or performance art, or music, whatever their background is, not because I think people have neat origin stories, but because I like the idea of first impressions or formative memories. So maybe we start there and use that as a way of getting into the work of Arika.

Barry Esson (BE): I don't know. I think all of these things are really incremental, I don't know if I have an epiphany or something. I think relationships to certain people I've met are really important. In terms of how I got into it, I'm from the northeast of Scotland and I'm amazed when you speak to kids these days and the access to information that they have. I don't think I knew who David Bowie was until I was seventeen or something. I grew up on a farm in Aberdeenshire and I came to university in Edinburgh to do civil engineering. I don't know how but I've been interested in art and philosophical thinking since I was in my mid-teens but didn't have anybody to speak to about it really. I remember coming to university and thinking I was into Albert Camus [Came-us] because that's how I thought you pronounced it; I hadn't said these things out loud. I got a job in the Famous Grouse House in the Fringe because my girlfriend's sister worked there. That's where I met Faith Liddell, she was the director and later on, she was the person who got us to do Kill Your Timid Notion at DCA,

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

she was the director at DCA. I worked there and the next summer I got a job as an assistant, a very lowly assistant producer for Grid Iron Theatre Company and worked for them for a bit. Then I was on the dole and then I worked for a film festival in Edinburgh and then I got a job at The Arches. I was supposed to be researching future artistic programmes because they were getting renovated and then also helping manage the renovation. I think I was twenty-four. The day I started they were half a million pounds over budget and six months behind. I got a shitty degree, I got a 2:2 in Engineering so I'm not in any way good at that but that ended up being how I got that job. From the back of that, I got another job at the British Council, and I ended up getting project management jobs in architectural projects to pay the bills and I was using that to subsidise the gigs that I was putting on. But yes, so I worked at The Arches. I suppose *Wire* was a big thing for me, reading *Wire*, maybe not coming across it until I was twenty-three and out of university. They had a column called the outer limits, which was the most obscure, experimental music stuff. You couldn't even buy it, the only place I could find online to buy it, and I only had an email address at that point, it's amazing how people access stuff now, but I had to buy it from a shop called Aquarius Records which is in the Mission district in San Francisco.

SG: Ha!

BE: I had to get stuff shipped internationally. I was buying stuff from Japan. I didn't know anybody else who was into those kinds of things. Then working at The Arches, Tiernan who was one of the duty managers who now runs Film City in Glasgow, he'd put on an experimental club night called Polaroid and he asked if I wanted to be involved. Us as well as Nick Fells, who is now at the University of Glasgow, put on this Instal. I don't know how I got into it, it was very incremental and through happenstance, but I suppose always being a solitary person. I think maybe my autism means I'm very interested in novel information or something. I'm just always interested in novel information and people who I think are smarter than me, so I just meet people. I guess the *Wire* was one of those people for me, in reading that and getting to know some of the journalists in that and then getting voraciously into making experimental music. Meeting Bryony who came from a film background and having known Faith, she came to the first Instal and got us to try and do something at DCA. It didn't work out the first time and then the second time it did and we tried to pitch that as something about the intersection of sound and image. We did that for a long time, I'm on

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

my second or third career. We used to do festivals. I did that for ten years and they were quite a big deal in the scene, both in artist film and in experimental music. I suppose over time, for all their limitations, those were just like a personal research project as well. You're really educating yourself as well. I don't want to sound like an old man but if you wanted to see things, this was before even Ubu web, so if you wanted to see Stan Brakhage films you had to order them from America and ship them. Or if you wanted to see a Paul Sharits film, we used to save up and then go to New York and sit and watch things for four or five hours endlessly because it wasn't available anywhere else or go down to LUX in London. It was a very different way of accessing stuff and if you wanted to see things live, then you had to bring them to the country.

SG: You either had to go to where it was, or you had to make the effort to bring it here.

BE: Yes, yes. I think maybe from being at The Arches and that being an opportunity, I didn't have a programming job or anything, but Tamsin who was the music programmer and Sarah who was the director were very supportive. This was before Jackie and all that lot worked there, although it crossed over a little bit with them at the end and with LJ and everybody. It's funny how we're all slightly connected through The Arches. I guess in terms of liveness, I think of the experimental music and film festivals that we used to put on. I still think that we have a research practice that started to exceed or be very frustrated with a connection to one genre or art form and maybe through a political and philosophical education that we gave ourselves and starting to have theoretical problems with the limitations of the art forms that we were working in. Maybe that's because of where we were at in our own education that we started to find those problems, or maybe they were always there, maybe they're still there, maybe there are other good things about those art forms. We definitely started to move away from being restricted to only thinking about particular art forms and instead recognise that what we were interested in were ideas and the liveness of their exploration, like ideas and sociality or their live embodiment. That kind of led to some frustrations with those festivals. I still think that even though I don't do much experimental music, that schooling in improvisation, or constructive improvisation and setting the grounds for improvisation or composing social situations or live interaction or something. I still think that was something we were schooled in through experimental music and maybe also expanded cinema. That's still a thread. It's also like a form of dramaturgy. It's about

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

thinking about live encounters happen, so that's still a thing that sticks with us, or that's still a way that I think. I guess when you're involved with experimental music or film, or expanded film, a lot of those things. I don't know that we're necessarily interested in live art per se. I'm sure that like all of these things, live art is its own prescribed bounded thing. When I look back at a lot of things we did through film or music, those things wouldn't be classified as live art, but they address all of the same things. If I think of somebody like Taku Unami, he's maybe started with an interest in music, but what he's doing is about live interaction and the sociality of live ideas as they're embodied in a performative way or something. I don't know how I got into it really, it was accidentally and through friends. Not being the person in Scotland who knew the most about experimental music at that time either but being in the right place at the right time, knowing people, and being involved in all the other experimental music networks at that time.

SG: I think I found a talk that you did, it must have been when you were doing Kill Your Timid Notion, a talk or a presentation that you did for GSA. You were saying that music is always about more than music and that feels like a stepping point in that process you just described of loving music and experimental and seeing everyone involved in it, but also coming up at the edges of what the form might be offering or what it was that you were interested in in the form.

BE: Yes, I think getting to the point of realising that you're interested in ideas. You can see that in our programming for Kill Your Timid Notion, I always call it Kitten.

SG: [Laughs].

BE: So, the programming for Kitten or for Instal, also when we did Music Lovers Field Companion at The Sage, a big part of what we did was reengaging with important avant-garde figures from the past who hadn't done things for a long time. I'm really proud that we got Ken Jacobs out of live retirement. Ken Jacobs is the kind of progenitor of American expanded cinema and he hadn't done anything for ten years or doing something with Gustav Metzger or Pauline Oliveros. There's a big thing about working with important figures from the past. Or Henri Chopin. Henri Chopin is one of the main figures in concrete poetry in Europe. He was an old guy, wasn't performing very much. He goes all the way back, he knew the Dadaists. He studied at art school with Bernard Heidsieck and Raoul Hausmann who'd known Tristan Tzara, so these really long lineages. I think there is

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

something about my own personal proclivities, it was easier for me to engage with things that had been theorised and had been written about a lot, and there was a lot of discourse around them. There was always that thread of being able to go back and work with all of these people. They were more accessible to me because there is already a body of theory around their work that was a way in for me into working with them and getting to know them, and in some cases, becoming friends with them. In a way, I think that points to the music programming which is an engagement with ideas and how they're developed artistically. I guess that kind of political awakening as well around the time that we were killing off Instal and Kitten and maybe feeling constrained by those art forms and also maybe by the way that experimental music frames itself as being counter-cultural or something but it also deeply embodies a lot of neo-liberal ideas. It's the same with art, people have to be self-exploitative, good at marketing themselves, they're producing reified objects that have an exchange value that has to be protected at all costs. There are a lot of things that are very problematic with that. I got a lot of stick for that line about music being about more than just music. I'm sure there was an article in the *Wire* slagging me off.

SG: Maybe I'll go and look for it. I'm curious about what it was that was objected to in the idea that music is about more than music. So, the choice to then move to the episode format, did you have a clear sense that you were going to move to episodes before you killed off the festivals, or was it a jump into not knowing what you were going to do next but realising that the festivals weren't serving your needs or your interests?

BE: Yes, I think the last Instal was really aggressive. It was full of artists who were doing live autocritique on the experimental music scene. We had this crazy idea that we'd have a working group which ended up being about sixty-five people. There was a thing called Glasgow Open School, I don't know if you remember that, and loads of those people are young students who were also involved in Free Hetherington and stuff. Loads of them are still really good friends of mine. We kind of wanted to do a thing with them and it ended up being sixty people in a room with the nihilist philosopher Ray Brassier and they were going to do this workshop throughout the festival and on the last day of Instal, they would be handed the keys to all of it, they would be able to do whatever they wanted, they had the artists at their disposal, they could stage whatever they wanted and say whatever they wanted and we would work with them to support them to do that. It was a really fucking

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

stupid idea. It was totally chaotic, it really felt like the death knell of that festival or something. Half the audience got up and left and loads of people in the experimental music community were really upset with us, and other people were like oh it's the best thing ever and it was like some kind of democratisation of it. I don't think we handled it very well. It definitely felt like why I am so angry about experimental music. There was a two-year gap between that and doing the first Episode. So yes, definitely stepping back and instead of being trapped in this particular art form and having to be involved in the critique of that art form in quite a negative way, to being like, well what is it that we're actually positively interested in and wanting to do I suppose, and I think different ways of wanting to work and not wanting to be limited to particular media, having a commitment to ideas and not art forms. I think it's a big thing that has developed over the last ten years but that was the start of it, us wanting to move through friendship and solidarity and beginning to deepen relationships over time rather than always feel like you're a festival that's representative of an art form and you always have to keep presenting what's exciting and new. A big thing that has happened through Episodes is that we have this returning cast of characters who are people that we're in long-term relationships with and every time we work with them we're deepening that conversation. I think Fred Moten has been at three or four of them. Earlier on, there were connections with Ultra-Red and people like that and the ballroom scene. There are a number of different things that we started to think about, like what does it mean to stay? Once you start making relationships with people and you're trying to have a deeper level of discourse or something, then why is it that festivals preclude that? Why couldn't we have the same group of people having a deeper conversation every six months or so? Once you start having more of a political commitment, and there were key people who helped educate us in that, especially the [sound art] group Ultra-Red. I don't know if you know them, they're a Marxist international sound art group. One of their first projects was around needle exchanges in LA, where users and needle exchanges were getting harassed by the police during the AIDS crisis. The best way for them to document that harassment without betraying the anonymity of the users was to make audio recordings because video recordings could be ID'd. They made audio recordings to help with harassment and then they developed a twenty-five-year Marxist political sound practice. They came to Instal in 2009 and through them we worked with the Unity centre, and we also worked with Scot-Pep the sex worker-led group and those are people that we still work

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

with now. That was fourteen years ago now and none of them are the same people, everybody has moved on. Anyway, there's something about that process of starting to move through friendship and solidarity and solidarity requiring you to think about how it is that you stay working in a community rather than just flit around or move on as if it's some kind of novelty. That's very much formed the basis of some of the commitments around Episodes, those friendships and allies and thinking about how you have access to resources and how those resources are useful to those relationships. Also, I suppose wanting to be able to work thematically, wanting to be able to address things that you think are urgent problems and foregrounding ideas much more strongly in the programme. I never really like the notion that art is supposed to show not tell, I'm autistic so I quite like to be told. I like to show and tell, or I like there to be a lot of discourse around things as well as just the embodied ideas. That means that you're putting together these programmes that have different registers of sociality. You might have one-on-one workshops or conversations, you might have live discussions where there are one hundred people, or you might have performances where there are three hundred people. You're thinking about how you can pose and move between these different registers of sociality so that you have some kind of larger argument that's made, or rather, not even that there's an argument that's made, but that you're opening up a ground in which lots of things might be generative, but you don't really know what they might be so you're creating friction between things. I guess those are some of the desires for Episodes, but I don't suppose we knew all of that for the first three. I guess that's why we called them Episodes. They're not a prescribed format. It wasn't a biennial or a sound art festival, it wasn't even trying to call itself a festival, you know. It's not a conference. It would allow us to have all of those different things if you pick a word that doesn't necessarily have a lot of meaning and then you fill it with your own meaning. Because it's episodic it implies that there's a narrative to it and this narrative has become an important thing in my thinking about how the Episodes develop. In a cheesy way, it's like a soap opera, what happened previously informs what's happening now and that will inform what's happening in the future. There are regular casted characters that keep coming back. It gives you permission to do things in a different way.

SG: It's interesting thinking about how those Episodes might work as or around narrative, but in a really unpredictable way. I'm just thinking about when I've heard or sat in rooms

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

with some of the people like Fred Moten, and Samuel Delany's been back a few times, how those conversations have a quality of familiarity to them of something being picked up again, but also it feeling like we're starting anew in some respect. I don't know how you come to these forms and the planning and the conversations with the participants, artists, the philosophers and other people involved in the Episodes, but I've sat in a few of Arika's events where there is a real sense of expertise being held in a particular way, in a quite open way. For me, it felt like this is recognition of knowledge and lived experience and being acknowledged and cherished in the room, but also being held quite lightly so it's not like an imperative that you are therefore obliged to be the expert, the voice of the thing in the room. I'm thinking in particular about the conversation spaces. I think maybe *Hidden in Plain Sight* where there was a circle of people sitting in the middle of the room and then the audience in circle around them and moving back and forth between, showing a video or a film clip, or sound and then coming back into conversation and then pausing into the audience and then coming back into the circle again. That sort of sharing of expertise was something I hadn't quite encountered before.

BE: Those particular events were with Robert and Michael from Ultra-Red. Robert's been working with the ballroom scene as a public health worker for twenty years. Michael at that point was the father of the House of Garçon, one of the founders of it. We were invited to do a music programme at The Whitney Biennial in 2012 and we'd been working with Ultra-Red for three years at that point. They'd been at Instal 9, 10, they were at Kill Your Timid Notion, we worked with them with Art Angel who were a mental health charity in Dundee, and we did a project with them with the Unity centre in Glasgow, so that had been some of our political education. When we got this invitation to do something at The Whitney we thought that it was a privileged access to space, it's the most important art biennial in north America, it's a very white privileged space and we thought we'd try and open it up and share it with the communities who are in New York that we have a connection with. One of those was 16 Beaver who are the art organisers around Occupy. An art strike was happening a Sotheby's at the time who were one of the principal sponsors of the Biennial so that was quite difficult to negotiate. Through Ultra-Red that was the first time we'd done stuff in the ballroom scene so we invited Ultra-Red to invite communities that they were working with into the space. I remember the conversations with Michael about what they wanted to do.

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

To start with they wanted to do something like Vogue Evolution [dance performance group] and then through conversations about the politics, Michael said, well the ballroom community has been coming and performing for white people in institutions like this for one hundred years, but we're not going to do that for you today, we have something to say, and we invite you to listen. I had to go and have a wee cry behind a curtain. I was like that's perfect, that's really amazing. The thing that happened in Glasgow was a year after that. We worked with Fred Moten for the first time at the Biennial with the ballroom community and those have been two big threads through all of our work since then. The next Episode was with Fred [Episode 4] and Episode 5 was inspired by working with the ballroom community. That event that you're talking about, that was all scripted out as a protocol based on Ultra-Red's thinking around popular education and liberation theology and different modes of listening. Michael now always has this thing of what did you hear, what did you feel and what did you see. He's very good at hosting. His heroes are Bayard Rustin and Oprah [laughs], he just wants to host. We've tried with lots of ways to break down those hierarchies of discussions. Sometimes it's worked really well and sometimes it's been really awful, but yes, we keep trying.

SG: The way we're talking about this, I was thinking so much about how you were describing solidarity and realising that idea of staying is both demanded by and enabled by acts of solidarity. It's a bit of a chicken and egg thing in my head. Does solidarity follow on from staying or is staying put and building on those relationships what actually gives solidarity life and consequence? I think there is something, maybe it's because much of the time I'm sitting in very conventional academic conferences, but there's something that's very generous or trusting maybe about that episodic format. As you said, you keep trying, but even when it doesn't work, there isn't a sort of instant judgment there. I don't know what conversations you then have to have after each episode where you go woah maybe we're not ever doing that format again. I don't want to project too much of my own experience of Arika into this conversation, but I think there is a real act of trust that people who were turning up to take part in the conversation will take part in the conversation and do so on their own terms but in good faith.

BE: Yes. I think we're really lucky with that. Obviously, there's a lot of stuff that happens in between Episodes or behind the scenes in terms of commitments and relationships that

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

feeds into that that maybe if you were just to turn up for the first time ever, you wouldn't see. You wouldn't immediately read that. With some of the people that I mentioned, we've had big fallings out with them as well and patched things up and come back together. Not necessarily out of disagreements between ourselves but often in terms of not fully understanding each other's context and putting things in tension with each other that we don't have the skills to resolve so you end up having people speaking from one position and people speaking from another position and they think they're speaking about the same thing, or I think they're speaking about the same thing but actually they're quite antagonistic towards each other. Those have been some very difficult moments at Episode but also some very generative moments. I don't think there is anybody we've actually fallen out with, but there have been lots of things like that. I guess also through doing them, I wanted to say that we stopped thinking that we were involved in art, we often say, this is going to sound like a rehearsed line, so I'll try not to say it but, what we think we're involved in are the aesthetic registers of sociality. I would define those as being how groups of people, you can say communities but that's also a problematic word, feel and what to be felt, or move and want to be moved, or how they look and want to be seen, how they listen and want to be heard. That kind of shifts you away from thinking about the presentation of objects. Saying that you're involved in listening rather than saying that you're involved in music is like saying that you're involved in the process. Saying that you're involved in how communities want to be heard is a political representation or something. They move you away from thinking about the presentation of something within a particular art form or finished objects or setting up those normal hierarchies of artists producing objects hiding behind those objects and the objects being something that the audience is supposed to encounter without too much context. I always had a problem with that so moving towards being involved in processes has been a big part of the learning through Episodes. When you were saying about people having specialist knowledge but that being held lightly it makes me think. One of your other questions was about dance, but I was thinking the theorist Cedric Robinson who coined the term the black radical tradition and who's been really influential for Fred and a whole generation of black studies scholars has a thing about leadership. There's another book by Erica Edwards responding to that and it talks about charismata or something and how in the white European church, white Christianity based on a colonial notion of individuals and selves, the preacher is mediating your relationship to

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

God. They're an individual self who stands in the way between you and God. I'm not religious but I like this analogy. They hold expert knowledge; they translate the divine to you for you but never with you. Whereas in the black church I think Erica Edwards argued that the preacher is just an emanation of the congregation, a temporary emanation that emerges out of the congregation and they act and say and respond. That's why call and response is such a big deal in the black church, they're emerging out of, and the degree to which they're a successful emanation is the degree to which they speak what the congregation knows or wants to be said. I remember reading about that and speaking to Fred about that and then going to a ball in New York and we already knew some of the Voguers like Pony Zion. It's very easy to think of Pony or Leiomy as a master or a specialist, but when you see it in connection to that ball of which there's a vast array of [what might look like] talent, there's space for everybody. There are people who are shit and they get chopped straight away and they're always like work on it and come back and you start to realise that Pony's like an emanation. There's that community, there's not a master or a high artist who should be valorised just in and of himself. The reason that he is celebrated is because he communicates things that the community wants to know, or already knows, in the most successful, most exciting, or most pleasurable way. That's been an important thing to think about in terms of moving away from mastery and towards embodied, shared aesthetic politics. That's something that I learned from ballroom even if they don't theorise it in that way.

SG: I'm interested in thinking about the implications of that idea. I need to go away and read Erica Edward's work about the notion of an emanation of a community. Does that then present particular considerations for you when you're inviting artists to come from one particular community to work in the context of Glasgow in Tramway where they may be inadvertently positioned as representatives of that community? Does it then turn on creating another community in the space of the Episode?

BE: Yes, I think you're right. That's why trying to format the episode as episodes is a continuing and deepening enquiry that's generative and unpredictable. You don't know where it's going to go but you're trying to bring a consistent group of people with you. There are some people who come because this one appears to be about x or I'm interested in maths, or whatever, but they're all really about the same thing. They're all really a

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

critique of western subjectivity. Every single one, even if we try not to programme it, it ends up with long conversations about the disillusion of the self and a move towards mutuality. They all tend to be about the same thing. There's a question you asked later on, there is a contingency about how they come about and the fact that we started at The Arches, we kind of got poached from The Arches by Tramway's Steve Slater and he put money into it that The Arches didn't have. All of the places that we've ended up doing events, until we got to a certain level, but for the first ten years they're all through personal connections so you're doing stuff in Glasgow. Me and Bryony live in Edinburgh, other members of Arika, there are five of us at the moment and two of them live in Glasgow, three of us live in Edinburgh. There have always been people in Arika who live in Glasgow but we don't live there. Bryony and I had caring responsibilities for a long time and Bryony is from Edinburgh, which is way we've stayed. That does set up a distance in a certain way and sometimes I think we're maybe not seen as being totally embedded in the art scene in Glasgow, we're not going to every opening or every party or every performance. As somebody who is autistic I can't handle those spaces anyway. The Episodes still strive to build that ongoing community. I guess the way that we've addressed thinking about that which isn't obvious and maybe isn't even referenced in the episodes, or I don't even know if you're aware of it, but we have a whole other strand of our programming called Local Organising that I don't know that we talk about that much.

SG: What I know about it is what I've read about it on Arika's website.

BE: Right yes, so we try and put a little bit on about it. So that's come out of trying to think about those questions, what does it mean to stay, what does it mean to have a commitment to particular communities and maybe how that isn't best served by inviting them to come to your thing. That's the standard model of arts inclusion, that's still what Creative Scotland and every other EDI policy is based on. It's a very colonial notion that we have this cool thing, we have our thing over here and we're happy to invite you into it, wouldn't you like to come and share at our thing. It doesn't in any way recognise other people's thing, you know, they've got their own shit going on. So Local Organising at the moment we have a budget of about forty thousand a year plus Cloudberry who work specifically on that and that specifically works with long-term relationships with sex worker and migrant communities, anti-poverty and housing and activism, and then also a trans inclusive

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

woman's shelter specifically for women with no recourse to public funds and we set aside that money each year. Cloudberry's job is to be in relationship to those groups and to ask them what they would like to do but they're not able to do because they don't have the resources or the staff time and then we try and do that with them, or help them to do that, or do that on their behalf depending on what they decide, or a mixture of all of those things. We do that together. We've done sex worker festivals but we also do quite a lot of parties or Christmas meals for Unity Sisters, that's a women's group in the migrant process. We had a zoom Christmas meal with seventy families and we organise the food. Or digital security, you know a lot of migrants were having their phone records and their text messages used against them so we'd say here's how to use signal or advocacy projects, or some of them are art projects. We're doing an artists' book thing at the moment with Umbrella Lane, which is a sex worker-led organisation in Glasgow. We don't really advertise all of those things, they're not all listed on our website because we're not trying to create political or cultural capital out of them. We're trying to move away from thinking of yourself as allies and try to think of yourself as accomplices with those communities. I suppose that's maybe also the way that we work with the ballroom community in New York. We've facilitated a lot of quite big things for them that they wanted to do that they wouldn't have been able to do anyway, especially through the vogueology group which is kind of like the political Marxist arm of ballroom, a very small arm of ballroom!

SG: [Laughs].

BE: Or liberation theologians or something, they're all really into Cornel West. That's something that maintains that connection or that commitment, or that stays with those communities, or you're trying to do all of the time and it's always super problematic and maybe it's going to change into something else because at the end of the day, it's still us getting resources and then redistributing them. Those resources are financial and then our staff capacity and then also our cultural capital right and maybe it would be better for those groups to access those resources directly, but some of them can't, they don't want to. Unity Centre doesn't take funding because it's specifically anti-funding, but it will work with groups who have funding if they decide what to do with it. They have a critique of state funding. It's super problematic. We're learning through it all the time, but that definitely is our attempt to engage with that kind of idea of continuous, iterative project of staying in

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

solidarity with communities in Glasgow. They're not visibly like artistic communities so I think that's maybe where we need to put in a little more effort in terms of specific commitments to artistic communities in Glasgow. We always have Glasgow-based artists in all of our episodes, but we have this thing of trying to step away from art so it's a funny tension for me. I think there are definitely things that we could do better in terms of maintaining communities or contributing to communities locally. That's something we're trying to do.

SG: As you describe, it's not as though there are any simple choices when you are trying to negotiate your relationship to structural things like arts funding and recognising your place within them and trying to make use of your place in that structure while also serving a critique of that structure. There isn't a fixed place where you can stand and go right, if I stand here, I know I'm always doing the right thing. That certainty is not on offer.

BE: Yes, especially with Creative Scotland funding you're always in this position of having to convince them of the fact that you're doing art. They're like okay so how is it that a digital security workshop for migrants is art, there's no art in that at all. So, we're like we're involved in the aesthetic registers of sociality, right and you're trying to expand that notion and push against it, but it does also circumscribe what you can do. As an anarchist, I'm not in favour of the state, right, but I still think it's better to take state funding than to be commercially driven. You're not going to commercially address some of these things that we want to be able to do. We recently got Paul Hamlyn Foundation funding for four years. [Our main contact there has been really supportive and put in a lot of effort to understand where we're coming from] but they're a bit more hands-on which is a bit annoying, and you need to convince them more regularly. A good thing about getting regular funding from Creative Scotland is that you have to convince them once every three years, whereas Paul Hamlyn want to know the variance in your budget and is it being spent on exactly what you said you were going to do. I think we say this with Creative Scotland as well, it's like you're not funding any particular outputs, you're funding our artistic organisational practice, which will generate outputs but they are unpredictable. Our material is relationships and sociality and we're going to produce events, but we're also going to value these relationships and so it's unpredictable what they're going to look like or how long they'll take. There hasn't been a regular period between any two episodes. There were three in one year, there were two in

Live Art in Scotland: Barry Esson

another. Once there was eighteen months between them. If it's based on a relationship then how long do you need to put the work in where something can be public and also when are people available and what are their capacities around it. They've all developed in different ways.

SG: It feels like a way of taking the instrumental demands for art and slightly turning them on their head. You know, the expectation that arts practice will serve social ends. It feels like a way of going yes, this funding will result in things that may be identifiable art works which you can point to as things that were funded, but they're not going to be prioritised or privileged in the way that a conventional curatorial model maybe would present them. They aren't the proof or the product of the process, they are produced absolutely by the process but they're not what your oriented on continuously. I'm not sure if I'm articulating my thinking very well there. I'm not suggesting that Arika is not interested in the creation of art and artworks or working with artists, but it's maybe your sense of where they sit in a process of relationship building as you've been describing, is perhaps what is distinct.

BE: Yes, some of the people that we work with, it's not like I'm against skill. We're not against virtuosity, I think maybe I used to be ten to fifteen years ago, there's a whole critique of virtuosity. Somebody like Storyboard P is virtuosic, he's one of a kind. It's elevated something and people can't do what he does but that's got to be situated in a political continuum. That notion of emanation maybe helps you think about that. It's like what has allowed that to be produced as well as stories like dedication, aptitude, stubborn mindedness, mental health, socio-economic background, and experience of racism. I think with funders you feel like you regularly have to make justifying arguments about how you have a different notion of value to what they might have. Maybe they fund things individually. Creative Scotland are happy to fund community art projects, right, and then they also want to fund things that go to the Venice Biennale. They don't often have those things side by side or place them on a continuum with each other or value things that don't look very virtuosic in the same way. There is an unpicking of notions of value, for me, that's happened over the last ten to fifteen years or something.