

Live Art in Scotland: Brian Lobel

This interview was conducted online via Zoom on 27th April 2021 as part of the Live Art in Scotland research project at the University of Glasgow.

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Brian Lobel (BL): I first encountered solo performance. In college I met Holly Hughes who is a famous lesbian performance artist who happened to be teaching at the University of Michigan where I was a student, but I had left school because I had cancer. When I came back, she was there and was teaching some of my friends. I read her book while I had cancer because I knew she was a new teacher. I quit school and I obviously fell in love with her but also became excited by solo performance because I was experiencing an extreme change in my body that forced me to become in relationship with other people. So much of the politics that underpin solo performance, live art, and performance art, this idea of seeing and being seen, audience-performer, felt very important in that moment. There were the same considerations for me as a twenty-year-old with cancer whose body changed really significantly during that moment. That was my first encounter with it and Holly introduced me to PS122. Because I had a pre-existing condition and before Obamacare, I had to go back to school because I was paying so much money in health care that it would make more sense for me to pay to be a student, I would save money. So that's what I did. Then I came to the UK where I met Holly's partners in crime, Lois and Peggy, the Queen Mary family. If the National Review of Live Art or the Arches had a London outpost, it would have been Queen Mary at that time. But that is my journey. It was from Holly to the Live Art Development Agency in Queen Mary and my first real job in the UK was with Joshua Sofaer at the Live Art Development Agency working on his Many Headed Monster project which introduced me to all of the performance artists, Kira, Oreet and Robin. That's my journey in.

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It was great. I was from an experience of living in Chicago and finding that people weren't getting me or noticing me, I was having a hard time with press and context. When I got to London everything seemed open. Duckie was there and London worked for me very quickly and easily. Maybe that's me, maybe that's London, I don't know, but it was a better match.

Stephen Greer (SG): My project is focussed on the context of Scotland but in relation to other parts of the UK and internationally, but I'm [PARTICULARLY] interested in your experiences of working in Scotland and with different institutions and spaces in Scotland like Forest Fringe, BUZZCUT, British Council Edinburgh Showcase, and Take Me Somewhere. I don't know which one of those threads we want to pick up with. Forest Fringe was maybe the longest running thread in Edinburgh and still is I suppose.

BL: Yes, so I was there in Forest Fringe's second season. It was a friend of a friend of a friend I ended up sitting with Andy in London and Andy is now my downstairs neighbour. I had a show that I'd made for my Masters degree that everyone loved and I had got a great gig at Sadler's Wells. I'm not a dancer so I was like I'm going to take this show to the Edinburgh Fringe and when I asked a few people they said it costs ten thousand pounds and it's going to be ridiculous. Then I thought well this is a show that doesn't make money, but I happened to find Forest Fringe who were so generous and loving. That first year was rough. I carried my bed back and forth from our accommodation to the venue because I needed a bed for my show, and I had a mattress and I carried it every day.

SG: Was that *Hold My Hand and We're Halfway There*?

BL: Exactly. I loved that old Forest thing. We also did Cruising for Art was one of the most disgusting, horrific, debauched, wonderful, gorgeous, glamorous parties ever. That was a real highlight. It was so sloppy and disgusting. That was the next year. Then Forest Fringe didn't want me to do one year and I was really upset about it. I feel like I had a lot of rejections in Scotland which I think is exciting to explore. My most intense year with Forest Fringe was when it was in Leith and I was performing *Purge* and I also think I was in the Edinburgh Showcase that year. Everything about the festival was about how much can you do in a minute. I wasn't doing *Purge* in the same moment, but everything in Edinburgh is always about doing too much. I love that workhorseyness because that's my modus operandi, but it always be crazy.

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SG: I think there's one image of the Forest Fringe as a little bit of an oasis from somewhere like the commercial pressures of the Fringe, but that doesn't mean that rhythm of the festival isn't there.

BL: The rhythm of the festival is what people love. That is why people do that. I have an interview with Jess Thom in [*The Routledge Handbook of Disability Performance*] and it's really about what is cool about Edinburgh is not accessible. Mamoru's husband sees fourteen shows a day, that's what he wants out of Edinburgh. My friends are not theatre people, they want to go up for two nights and see ten shows and they want to come back. It's not so sustainable, it's not local to Edinburgh. Also, who cares. People who don't want to be there in Edinburgh can move out in the month of August and let out their place for a ridiculous amount of money and they can go, and people who do want to be there can be there. I don't think too much of the city is unpredictable in August. It's very predictable. Those movements happen very slowly. Summerhall becoming one of the main spaces really changed the energy. It was year that Summerhall and Leith were happening that I was like I need to get a bike or realise that it's a forty-five-minute walk between these two venues.

SG: Yes, they're not close to each other.

BL: They're like different cities!

SG: [Laughs].

BL: I love Forest and I travelled with them all over the world, but Edinburgh still felt like home. I was devastated, Checkpoint that new restaurant that's in the Forest couldn't be a more horrific transition of a building. Forest was disgusting and there was shit on everything and the tiles were disgusting, and the tables were scribbled on, and then it was white, clean, Nordic design that was so gross. I loved Forest. Their second place wasn't as nice. Forest Fringe being in Out of the Blue was great, but a very different vibe.

SG: Do you think you would have done the Fringe if it hadn't been for involvement with Forest, or would it have happened eventually? You mentioned knowing what the regular price tag often is.

BL: I think I would have with *Purge*.

SG: Why *Purge*?

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BL: Because it was a show. It's an hour long, one-person show that I toured incredibly successfully internationally. It's probably my most successful show, whatever that means. I made forty thousand pounds in a year from doing that show so it was financially successful. It was about Facebook and it was very simple, it was me, a computer and a projector with three lighting cues. It was for that scale. I did my dance show, but I also did my show *An Appreciation* at the same time which was the first time that I was on the news. I was talked about on the review show. There's a Scottish writer, maybe a lesbian, what's her name.

SG: I'm laughing at myself because there are three or four people it could be in my head from knowing the Scottish landscape.

BL: Stella Duffy and Kirsty Wark and that was huge for my career. Huge. I lived off that for ages and my show got booked everywhere. So, would I have done it if not for Forest, probably not. Not for a few years because there wouldn't have been a context. Just like BUZZCUT, you know, create a space for things that are one person shows in front of an audience.

SG: So, we're talking about work which is durational or has a durational component, is one-to-one in some respect, that doesn't fit that product touring model maybe.

BL: Yes.

SG: I guess we're jumping on from Forest Fringe in terms of time but being involved with the festival again with The Sick of the Fringe is a rather different kind of proposition. Can you tell me a little more about that work? I mean you're not presenting work there, it's a development frame, it's a curatorial frame, it's a critical frame that is being brought to the festival.

BL: Absolutely. Years into working with Forest, I felt like I pretty much understood the scene well, despite the fact that I'd never had to spend such extravagant amounts of money. I was there and I remember I was like I really need to start something for people who want to bring weird work that's really hard to market to the festival. For me, it was always like give me your one-hundred-word copy, give me your fifty-word copy, give me the ten-word copy and give me the one-word copy. If I'm doing something that needs to expand context, that's not here, so how can I make everything slow down and help us actually listen. There's also this question of if there is one famous show that talks about mental health in the year that's

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the good one and maybe it is the best, what happens to the rest? Why is there a feeling that if you're interested in mental health, go to this one not that one. These people are both working very hard. If we say this one is better, which it might be, it's not useful to the sector thinking about mental health because this person did not mean to make a bad show. They might have less resources, they might be less mature. So, I was like how do we capture all the learning that was there. No one intends to create a bad show, that doesn't land and doesn't have a context, but it often happens and it particularly happens to marginalised people and people are often marginalised by their health or identity. That was the thinking behind *The Sick of the Fringe*. In that first year it was really about trying to say that was an assumption that I made, this is a very dangerous place for the real conversations I want to have. The first year and the second year were really about testing those assumptions and thinking about what we need. *The Sick of the Fringe* is still involved with the Edinburgh Fringe, and I'm an associate artist for *Something To Aim For* which produces *The Sick of the Fringe*. It's kind of complicated. The thing I loved about *The Sick of the Fringe* is that it really brought me out of my Forest Fringe bubble and got people talking to me who were like look I spent a ton of money to come here, I don't know why I'm not being seen and it was less about saying let me help you, I can make you rich, and more about saying how can I help you be seen and how can I advocate quietly. It was about trying to think about how we can improve this machine that doesn't really serve people well. It serves a very small group of people very well, but for everyone else, how could we give them a better opportunity and how can we carry on conversations well beyond this place. Of course, now we're in a totally different world where everything is digitised, but there used to be a huge fetishisation about being in that room because the thinking and learning that was happening in that room wasn't necessarily going to go to other places. That was what I was interested in.

SG: It's interesting, what you were saying there is making me think about the space of the festival as intense in lots of ways which are not remarked and also temporary in ways which often aren't remarked. I think she ended up writing about it for an online publication, FK Alexander talks about how pretty much every venue in the city has a bar in it.

BL: Oh yes, I think we might have commissioned that writing from FK.

SG: Oh right.

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BL: We wanted to look really critically at aspects of what it means to be sober at the Fringe, what does relaxation look like at the Fringe. These are huge questions because the whole industry is built on alcohol sales. Everything, Soho Theatre, The Ark, Southbank. The Arches was a complicated interweaving of those things and of course its demise was about people's lack of perception.

SG: About where the money was coming from, yes.

BL: We said we're going to shut down this bar that is being irresponsible but you're also shutting down the art space that is funded by the bar. That is something that Duckie has had to deal with. Everyone who has had a real profound movement in that direction has to deal with. You know, Summerhall without the booze. We were trying to be agile and think what is happening here right now and what is needed. So, to go in and do dedicated looking instead of saying we have to do this, this, and this.

SG: I'm just thinking about the bigger narrative that gets told about the space of live art as one that tries to be responsive rather than prescriptive. I came across an interview, I'm not sure what it was for, it was a few years ago. You were talking about how live art is what is not everything else. You were saying live art is the moment where things become exciting because they're not quite dance, or it's a text that is not quite theatre. Is that the mindset of that? Rather than going, I'm going to make a piece of work that looks like this and functions like that, there is this sort of active encounter that you're seeking through the kinds of projects that you're working on.

BL: One of the things I'm interested in now is there is an overreach that I think has happened and there's a colonising nature that live art or performance art has had. Like, oh that great party, that was live art or this great piece of activism, that's live art. Live artists are people who want to be paid for their work to make live art and of course things can be seen via a lens of live art or through the context that everything holds potential possibility for live art, but the new work I'm doing, the *Sex with Cancer* project, is a sex toy shop. It uses live art methodologies, but I wouldn't say this is a piece of live art. I guess I'm not interested in that formal thing. I want to make sure that live art, performance art is not cannibalising like I pissed on it and called it what I want it to be.

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SG: [Laughs] It feels like that dynamic is being fed by a few different places, one of which is arts funding bodies of different kinds are inviting artists to make claims about the social value of their work but also people want to feel good about the impact of their work. I want to feel good about the impact of my work as a writer.

BL: If Creative Scotland and Arts Council England still have an understanding for live art and that it might be weird it cuts both ways. I like to think of live art as a strategy for connecting with audiences and connecting with contexts.

SG: I'm thinking of points of contact with Scotland and it's a show that's been in lots of different places, *You Have to Forgive Me, You Have to Forgive Me, You Have to Forgive Me*. I can see on the wall behind you your poster which is gorgeous. That was the show that was at Take Me Somewhere in Paisley?

BL: It was first at BUZZCUT and then in 2019 there was a version of it called *Binge* where I work with other artists. The BUZZCUT experience was a really wonderful one.

SG: What was BUZZCUT like, how did you come into contact with the BUZZCUT crowd?

BL: I just applied. It was a weird work, it's very live art friendly. I said I'm going to sit in the middle of your foyer and watch tv all day. That's what I'm going to do and I'm going to drink, and everyone is going to wear pyjamas and it's going to be nice. I don't think I did much more than apply with a good idea and get programmed. It came after I applied twice to the National Review of Live Art and did not get in. That felt like a very scene. It felt very insular, inaccessible, and not in the mood for my American friendliness, which emanates through my work. It took a little while for Lois Keidan to come round to me, it took a little while for live artists to get me. This is not an act, I'm friendly and I care to connect with audiences. I was a former American camp counsellor and that might be how I engage an audience. But BUZZCUT was a real.. Rosana and Nick were really doing something that felt like it worked with me, and I worked with it. I had a great time. I did *You Have to Forgive Me* there and Neil from the British Council saw it and I got into the showcase the next year. That was very good. I'm sure I didn't lose a ton of money doing BUZZCUT but my artwork has never been my primary money maker, I've always worked in academia because of my visa, because of a need to do that. The next year I went back to do my *What the Treatment* project which was gorgeous as Blytheswood Hotel and that was one of the best performance nights of my life.

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SG: What was so distinctive about it?

BL: We rented the spa because I had Wellcome Trust funding at the time, BUZZCUT would never have had the money for it. I said I need to rent this spa for the night for these twelve people and we ran the joint. What's the name of the area where BUZZCUT was?

SG: It was in the city centre but then it moved to Govan.

BL: If you're in Govan and then suddenly you're at a very fancy spa, everyone had been sleeping on their friend's house and was treated like a queen and that was amazing. What I liked about BUZZCUT, and it was not a project for the public, people had to apply to be in that work and BUZZCUT didn't blink at twelve people having a night out at a spa is art and we're programming that. I might have performed or done one more thing with BUZZCUT.

SG: I know there were versions of live art speed dating at BUZZCUT, you weren't involved with any of them? No.

BL: Live art speed dating was a poor man's cruising for art.

SG: [Laughs]

BL: No, I didn't do that. I don't think I did anything else at BUZZCUT. I think I just did those two pieces. I might have gone another time or two for fun just to be there because it was a scene. I did go to the National Review of Live Art in my first year of doing my Masters and I remember thinking wow it's a scene.

SG: Do you remember who you saw that year? What year would that have been?

BL: I saw Helena Hunter, there were some Belgian artists who had five installations. I saw Richard DeDomenici, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Harminder Judge, and Action Hero. I did not see a lot of work like what I was creating. I don't know if Stacey ever performed at National Review. Stacey's work feels about where I think the edge of friendliness and comfort with an audience for National Review. I find tons of things in Scotland and England and internationally to be not loving this approach.

SG: From my perspective, across a whole range of different festivals and contexts, I think there's a streak of seriousness attached to live art which is unfounded. There is a solemnity to proceedings. Even when the people making it are quite joyful and relaxed and chilled, there is a formality which descends. Maybe it's because I have a background in comedy that

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performance art that makes me laugh is one of my favourite things in the universe, but it's quite a hard thing to pull off because of the tonal conventions perhaps of the form.

BL: It's a group of friends that have a way. My experience of BUZZCUT and Take Me Somewhere and National Review of Live Art was that it was very much a scene more than anything else. If you go to The Place in London you'll see mostly dancers, but you'll see a trickle or two of other people. I did not get that impression in Glasgow, but that's because there are so many artists living and working there that they will always fill a room. They're lovely, wonderful, brilliant artists, but I did sense that there was a disconnect between themselves and people who would never go to that world. We saw that at BUZZCUT, especially the latter initiative that BUZZCUT were doing, which was trying to be more based in Govan, really trying to engage so that it doesn't feel weird when a group of us go to the pub across the street and take over the karaoke night, that feels like colonising. There are class assumptions, whether they're accurate or not, about the arts and how it can colonise spaces and take over things.

SG: I'm trying to work out where those dynamics come from, particularly when I'm on the inside or at the very least close to them. I'm wondering whether it's a little bit to do with the scale of Scotland and the scale of Glasgow. Glasgow is a city but it's not a huge city and there is a community in London which also has a scene, but just because of the scale of London maybe it's more dispersed. In Glasgow there's also only one or two venues or physical spaces, so if there's a thing on there that's for your gang, everyone is there.

BL: I loved this piece by Ivo Dimchev. I don't know if you saw that at Tramway.

SG: Yes.

BL: I loved that show.

SG: Were you sitting with Katy Baird maybe?

BL: Very possibly.

SG: I think we were sitting three or four rows away with some other people.

BL: The thing was it was so telling. He kept saying I don't want artists, I want real people. They didn't exist, they weren't there. That's not a critique of Take Me Somewhere. You have two hundred tickets, you want to sell them, that's fine but I was thinking that no one in

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Glasgow knows this is happening. People would love Ivo Dimchev's show. You don't need an MA to understand that performance. There are some artists that you do need context and a mode of engaging that enhances the work, but Ivo Dimchev's piece was so clear and easy, it could be on the Vegas strip.