

Live Art in Scotland: Christian Noelle Charles

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Stephen Greer (SG): I wanted to start with your first encounters with performance, whether it was performance art or live art or whatever. I don't trust neat little origin stories, but I'm interested in first encounters or influences.

Christian Noelle Charles (CC): It's hard because I grew up with performance. My mum ran a dance studio for twenty years and it was more of the dance community, if you talk about Alvin Ailey, Philadenco, which are basically American dance companies based in the US, I was surrounded by that 24/7. It was the head of the conversation, taking dance classes since I was two. It was always a presence there, but if you're going to talk about live art, performance art, I think the first time it really came to the forefront with me was when I moved to New York when I was eighteen for school. At the time it was Tamika Norris, a performance artist now TJ Dedeaux-Norris, who I think I went with friends for the first time to see them perform and it was so out of my comfort zone at the time. I think it was a performance where they cut themselves and they put blood on the walls, that was spreading through. They glued their lips together and they were a boundary contact that some people were not into and some people were almost willing to make out with them and I was like, what is going on? I was kind of tight, there was a lot of tension because you didn't know the sense of boundaries. They're in my top five artists because it was such a different experience. I don't know if the gallery is still there in New York but it was in the East Village somewhere. It was the first week of school I was starting when I first

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encountered that, and I was like oh god. It didn't get me into performance until years later, but I knew the separation between performing arts and performance art, so that was like the first time.

SG: So that sense of there being a distinction there in the background?

CC: Yes. That distinction was very present. I think that and I think it was the same line up, I don't remember the artist, but it was a woman who was singing the Star-Spangled Banner and stuck a firecracker icicle up her vagina while doing it. I was like, this is so daring. It was literally right in front of me, and it was kind of the sense of shock value that I encountered as well. I think it was that on top of TJ, I was like this is a different dynamic. This is a different attitude placed in terms of performing.

SG: So I guess both of those artists are working with what might be called explicit body art, but was it about the encounter or the dynamic that was more appealing?

CC: It was literally that, the boundary, it was invasive [laughs]. It tailored to almost power in a way, and control, that the audience did not want. You were either enamoured or shocked, like I'll stay back for a bit. It made me think about that for a long time.

SG: Was that present when you started making performance work or live performance work? What came first, making video work or live performance work? I can't remember from my last conversation.

CC: It was video work I think. It started with design, like graphic design, and that sense of layout and organising and printing, and then it went to printmaking in terms of silk-screening, that kind of movement there and then video. So between performance and video, video was first. Using a camera and filming myself came first. It was a combination of building the confidence of myself and taking courage of saying I'm an open vessel, literally giving myself in a way that I shouldn't have, like how we do in social media these days.

SG: Because it feels like quite a few of your works are making this really active use of the selfie as a format or the dynamic of the selfie. I know you've talked about this in terms of self-love. Self-love perhaps more than self-care, but I guess perhaps that dynamic's in there as well.

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CC: It's self-love and acceptance and then it leads to care and then you have to nourish and sustain it. I guess the video work and having that space, it's not completely like you can control it. That's what it felt like with the power. Also, I used myself as a vessel to practice in terms of editing and layering in terms of the content I wanted to put out, not content, the work I wanted to put out. I don't like content; I don't like that word.

SG: [Laughs].

CC: So that really put in that position, and I think performance followed. It's weird because you think performance is first because of the dance background I had growing up and being in front of an audience, but it was never my own at the time. You had to just get energy out from someone else's choreography. Video felt like it was my own and then I was like oh okay, I can see how I can lay this out or something.

SG: I was reminding myself of some of your more recent work, and it was really interesting to me to see how some of those works seem to be incorporating your process of video work, of layering and editing into live performance as well.

CC: Yes.

SG: I found some documentation of the work you did at Tramway which is part of the Call and Response series in relation to the Nick Cave exhibition. That's a work where one of your video works, a video installation but you're also performing as a live performer in relationship to it.

CC: Yes, I think it was *DA BE A BE*, that was the one in 2019?

SG: Yes!

CC: That response was very unique because I got to meet Nick Cave, he came for the show and he wanted to have this response. It shook me because he reminded me of my childhood so much. It's funny because it was such a prominent activist kind of work, it was about the times of American culture and the times of black America. The sense of celebration and love at the same time there was so much hidden inside, if you saw in the chandelier there were guns and bullets. People took it a certain way, it was that de-connotation, but for me it was such a period of homesickness because it reminded me so much of home and that representation of the art. Also just his presence, it reminded me of how I grew up as a

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person. So the response I put up there was more of a homage to my family versus the actual [laughs], it sounds selfish but what that sense of representation of where you came from and how you grew up and it was like I wanted to respond in a way of introducing myself so you get to know me and get to know the representation of the family because I think the separations, the way I grew up was very specific that I needed to really find who I was. It was actually during a period I felt really homesick, I was exhausted, I had a lot of burnout from previous performances, and it kind of bounced me back. It was the start of a healing journey that is still continuing today, but that definitely was a kick-off for it. In terms of the process of it, I think since talking to you last time I'd just graduated from school or something, I had a little bit of resources, I was literally was down with resources. It was the first time I really got to get back into video and I did some performance, because it has to go from video to a performance with me. I relied on performance because the opportunities were there and that gave me a lot more freedom to see what I wanted to put out for video. In the performance aspect of it, I felt that I was more myself at the time.

SG: I'm always interested in that mix of your vision, what you want to make and also going, what's the shape of the opportunity, what are the resources I have to hand? I was really struck by, I remember it must've been *Take Me Somewhere*, a performance at Tramway, I want to say it was called *TURN*?

CC: *TURN*, yes.

SG: And the surprise of the absence of video in that, it was you as a solo performer and your vocal score in that and maybe we can talk about the link between that. It reminded me of, I was watching clips of *Hustle*, which I think you did at Dance International Glasgow a year or two later. Maybe we should just talk about that first work about *TURN*, the sort of repeated verbal score of you talking yourself up or someone else talking you up, or speaking to a mirror that isn't there?

CC: Yes. It builds up confidence when you're talking to yourself, that talk in the mirror, that motivation. I kept repeating that I was the worst at times, and that really put me down. I think it was also at the same time, I was still at my peak obsession with Italian cinema from the sixties and seventies just like classic cinema, when females turn their head and the gaze when there's something dramatic happening and the score just goes crazy in terms of that feeling. It's like those kind of moments when you're almost going into a performance,

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you're about to perform, that's kind of the same juxtaposition of having those moments of kind of like a grace and a presence but there's so much insecurity inside, and showing that separation between the two. I didn't have video in that, it was more observing that sense of timing in terms of that snap, with the turning of the head. I kind of framed it in a way where I relied on sound which was basically my video practice in terms of using music to really create my narratives. Whereas this, I just took clips of a score and chopped it and took a section of it and then I would separate it, but then I would leave fifteen minutes to improvise for myself to get a lot of my energy out at once [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

CC: Those words were all on the stage at the time, I just had a parameter of you have ten minutes to speak, what can you get out in your head and then the music would be that turn, but it had to give that energy of trying to build that confidence.

SG: A lot of those strategies or similar strategies are at stake in *Hustle*. I mean you've got the literal prince of the metronome of that structured tapping, but also the shifts between what feels to me like the two major tones or emotional states or logics of this. What looks like or feels like to me as an onlooker, a rehearsal process, and then the shift to this club space where there's this, I don't know, sensory level or a different, I'm trying to think of what to say.

CC: Yes.

SG: Like a wash of colour and pleasure in those sequences that's slightly different.

CC: It's crazy now, now that I'm thinking about it [laughs] because I had not thought about those two pieces in a long time. I think *Hustle* was the reflection of the burnout I had that year and how much I had to pull through at the time and it felt like the metronome was like this very consistent sense of time. It's almost the point that you could go mad but it also sustains the music and rhythm from it. I think going from a graceful performer to almost a boxer vibe, it's literally like that sense of pulling through. I think that was the difference between those two pieces, but it still had the same structure of, take a clip of a song I loved at the time, what was it? It was Il Badone from Italian cinema and this one was like an Anderson .Paak, which was a song like 'reaching too much, you're doing way too much', it was almost repeating I think you're doing way too much [laughs]. It was expressing those

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emotional states at the time. They were both similar, but it was the different perception, whereas this one was like insecurity turn and based off of insecurity and *Hustle* was just like, this is a lot, slow down! [Laughs]. Don't overwork or something.

SG: It's so interesting to hear that because when I was watching and trying to pay attention to the metronome sequences, I was trying to work out what I was seeing in terms of control, whether it the metronome was like, you've got to keep going, you've got to keep going, or whether it was also a sort of device for you to go, I have control. I have a practice.

CC: I think it was more of the you better keep going, you better keep going.

SG: Yes.

CC: It was like time was going while you were still working and in that one I think it was more like sounds or a repetitive combination to really show how much you're really trying to pull out, even though in the end when you're doing the performance it can go out the window. It could be completely different, the energy is different. The sense of, I guess from the dance studio growing up, you could mark a performance but then you have to give your all out of it, regardless of how much you rehearsed it.

SG: I guess there's the context there of it being, as you said part of Dance International Glasgow, that there's maybe a frame that comes with it when it's part of that kind of festival.

CC: Yes.

SG: Am I right in thinking that this was a strand of a programme that was curated by Project X?

CC: Yes, this was part of Project Exchange of Project X's, bi-annual programme where they invite several different artists from different countries and some that represent Glasgow to perform dance works and stuff. I submitted something and they took me on, and I think at the time I had a version of *Hustle* that was from Take Me Somewhere after-party a couple of months before, but I think that was like the peak of my burnout [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

CC: So it was kind of using that moment and reflecting from that experience from that, to go into Exchange. I think it was also a combination of how in the black community, especially

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black women, you work twice as hard to get halfway or something and that's the identity of *Hustle*. We all within that organisation that I'm active in, we all feel the same way in the same boat, so it was based off of those stories as well.

SG: I was looking at the places and spaces that you presented work in and recognising a movement back and forth between galleries and organisations who support visual and video art, and ones who do performance and dance work. Maybe Tramway sort of sits somewhere between those, and also recognising some of your work on a few different occasions with BUZZCUT and also with the CCA, again there's a sort of art centre or culture space or cultural organisation which is trying to be interdisciplinary. So partly thinking about that, the structural conditions in mind which you were alluding to, what's it been like working with BUZZCUT? Because I know you did the Double Thrills and also the club residency I want to say?

CC: Yes. BUZZCUT is such an honour because I feel like they're giving opportunities for performance artists and having more exposure with performance artists in this entire community, really seeing what is out there and what's different and who's taking risks and who's not. At the same time bringing performance artists from internationally and showing what the difference is, and having artists inspire. Double Thrills, I think I told you before, that was a surprise like, oh do you want to do this? I didn't see it coming, I was just doing a performance in the Art School, but it built a relationship, so then when I did the club residencies it was a space to play around, it was an opportunity to expand the different mediums, so I did probably four or five club performances in the span of two months and it was my opportunity to really collaborate with different artists and DJs to see what the relationships were like in the city and what the vibe is, what the tone is, because it's like you don't know where to place yourself in the city at the moment. I think what's interesting with BUZZCUT is they have a strong relationship with Tramway now and are literally pushing forward new and unique stuff that they can tailor it to its own. I would say CCA and Tramway are open to interdisciplinary, they can say that they are a hybrid of different places in the arts and are giving space for artists to really feel like its their own and not what the gallery represents, of the artist if that makes sense?

SG: Yes.

CC: At the same time, they still sustain their mission.

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SG: Yes. I'm also a bit aware of, this is coming from the outside, not having been commissioned by either of those organisations, that the CCA, the BUZZCUT residency, the way they frame them is relatively open. You might go in with a specific pitch, but they're not saying at the end of six weeks we need to see a show, we need to see a thing. I'm just thinking about the role of that kind of offer, when as you've kind of said, burnout is such a possibility and especially burnout maybe if you're an artist of colour is even more likely.

CC: It's definitely for an artist of colour it's more likely, there's a higher expectation. At the same time, you don't know the capacity of the institution and what they're willing to push forward, so you're giving a lot more energy than you think you should. You want to bring to the table what you want and during these times it's very hard because audiences are different. I would say with the opportunities I have and the space that was given, it kind of shook me at times because I had that much freedom and I'm grateful for it. It just gave a lot of space to what I felt like needed to be put out, to see what works and see what didn't, versus, okay you have this specific performance and you have this specific timeframe, stuff like that. I could have performed for over an hour if I wanted to, some people did five minutes sometimes. It depends on what you're feeling in your practice in the moment, and I think that's what they prioritise. They know who will be willing to take that chance, that's what they're confident about. A mix of that with humility, just respect for the artists, I think that's the main priority and aim. I think every artist is tailored to differently and also that needs to be recognised as well.

SG: I'm trying to think about those and other opportunities fit within a larger landscape where there is a sort of curatorial, programming or commissioning process, where venues or live arts organisations are kind of looking across the horizon and going, we need to have some artists of colour, we need to have some queer artists, we need to have a piece of dance. I'm wondering whether those more open residencies, which are coming maybe more from open institutions is a way of mediating or preventing that more tokenistic practice.

CC: I think that's the biggest fear, I think I came up in a tokenistic period because of how early it was. Especially for the POC community, especially for the black art community, I think The Other'd Artist that came out of Transmission in 2017 it was like the first time, Travis Alabanza came up for a show and called out that there was a black presence, there's a POC presence that was not being paid attention to. It was huge, it was one of the biggest

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shows I've encountered in Glasgow at the time and it was like the first time I was like, oh my god. At the same time, in terms of the art world context in Glasgow, it kind of sparked in terms of a bigger presence than what it was recognised for or what people were willing to engage with. There was more POC presence, people like Ashanti Harris, who I'm now close friends with. The invitations were much heavier, but at the same time to understand where the mission comes from for those shows, and this is particularly with curators working with people. I had to ask for a coffee every time to see what the vibe is, what's the intention. Like did you actually look at my work? [Laughs] Did you focus on it?

SG: [Laughs].

CC: Instead of saying, oh yes this is the black woman here.

SG: And again that speaks to the extra work that you find yourself doing in order to make sure that your work is taken seriously or taken respectfully.

CC: Yes.

SG: Or taken as work!

CC: Yes, yes. It's interesting with the bigger institutions, because the institutions that I've worked with so far that I know felt like there was a progression with my practice, so the ones that literally took consideration of my work itself and the value of having a bigger conversation than just race. It needs to stay there, it needs to be there, but they were willing to have the conversation. They were willing to put it forward, they were willing to see what your process was to have those messages and content [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

CC: In terms of production.

SG: I had an interesting conversation with someone the other day who was talking about when Scotland and maybe Glasgow in particular is going to go through a process of addressing its colonial history and the place of work by artists of colour in there, and knowing that the relationship can't be, we want to make a thing about colonialism so we'll turn to the artists of colour. The thing that the person I was talking to suggested, was going, obviously you can't make the assumption that just because someone is a person of colour they care to engage with that history, but they might choose to.

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CC: Yes.

SG: And they were talking about maybe at a practical level it was about doubling the offer so you go, if you're interested in talking about this project we'll also come back and commission you on something completely different next year, but right now there's money for this. We were having an interesting back and forth about the politics of that, of going if nothing else, that requires a lot of trust to be built up between a curator and an artist.

CC: Yes. It's literally like the person who is proposing that idea have to do all the research and they have to do the investment of that and calling out the accountability that was at hand that was lacklustre before, and don't rely on the person of colour. Honestly, if you're going to invite that person over they literally maybe highlight something that is there or something, but they can't educate you [laughs] in the process! Don't have the time. I think that is a process, we're all learning from each other and we all want to share the contributions and the history we encounter from. I think also at the same time, who will invest in it? Who will put it forward? Who will give the equity within that? [Laughs]. That's the biggest problem in that kind of material that goes forward. It's hard with me because it's just like I'm a girl from New York and my engagement is more present I would say, in terms of the community that's in front of me. So when someone approaches me with that, it's like you've got the wrong person, you're just searching for something.

SG: Yes, it's like you've not done your homework.

CC: Yes, you've not done your homework. It's weird that it's a touchy subject but it's really accountability in the end.

SG: The work that's been made and that you've been making over the last year, I've been trying to think about all of these conversations as not just about the artist's work over the last five or ten years or whatever, but also a snapshot of right now, at the end of March 2021. So I'm conscious that you've made a whole number of things that have been digital or online and maybe that's worked to your advantage as someone with existing video practice. I know you did some work for Tramway TV for their Instagram hosted video series, and you have an ongoing series, *Gated 2021*, which seems to be a combination of your print practice with your live performance and your video work.

CC: Yes! [Laughs].

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SG: So can we talk a little bit about those projects? What's been the lockdown art practice? [Laughs].

CC: The lockdown art practice was my own self-care! I had to take a break from performance. I had to separate myself from that, from the burnout of 2019, that's what I call it. Actually it was burnout 2019 to March 2020 that kind of snapped! It made me snap, as probably a lot of people have at that period. I had to get my shit together, I had to get my health together! [Laughs]. Literally a wake up call in my body and my soul. So I kind of separated myself from my performance, I separated myself from my work for a couple of months and then really just rebuilt myself back up. As that time progressed, I had opportunities to print and just went back into a printmaking practice. At that period I found a lot more resources within the community who very supportive. Shoutout to Print Clans, shoutout to Transmission giving me space during the lockdowns! They invited one person when the guidelines were feasible, to just go and make work without thinking, without an institution biting you somewhere for a commission. I had a little extra money from lockdown that I was able to just have that space and go free and now it's gradually picking up. I finally have my own editing suite and can make videos on my own again! Not like running to somewhere to try and get a video done. It's a lot less stress. I think *Gated*, what I've just been thinking about, is the sense of opportunity, boundaries, the sense of home and the values you have in that. That's what I'm thinking about right now. I can't spill too much because I have some shows about it coming up, but the thought process of privilege and opportunity and the way of giving and presenting, those are the thoughts I'm thinking right now. The sense of boundary and reaching for something, the *Reaching Hands* series I did last year that was kind of the thought process. That was the heaviest conversation between different artists and people and politics, especially in America and the UK [laughs], those kind of chances and space and care. I guess the biggest conversation is that sense of camaraderie when you're working with an artist, the artist and the curator, that's my biggest conversation. I had obsessions with some people. The way that they carried themselves, the way that they worked with artists a certain way. I guess, how would you nurture an artist and that sense of camaraderie, what are the values, what's the mission.

SG: My sense is partly knowing, is trying to have a conversation which is about learning more about what the artist wants and then trying to support it with, not so much solutions

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as possibilities, of going if that's the direction of your travel, maybe I can be a fellow traveller who goes, this is the sort of opportunity, these are people who you might want to speak with or work with, this is a poet, this is a film. Thinking of ways that might feed the artist's process. So my presumption is that artists are the experts in their own practice [laughs] and that if I'm ever asked to give feedback on someone's work, I always want to take ownership of my feedback. What I'm offering is not authority, it's a situated perspective. When it comes to the knots and bolts thing it becomes trust, and that means handing over resources actually. It means going you need time and money to do this, well that's the deal [laughs]. I often think it doesn't have to be a lot more complicated than that, you need a conversation which is a trusting one or a confident one or a nurturing one. I just think about the fact that I work for a big institution obviously, and so I think if I had interns, if I have access to studios or a rehearsal space and I don't at the moment obviously because of the pandemic, if that's a door to which I have a key, then okay you invite someone into that space.

CC: I guess that's the feeling right now. Someone has the key, but it's like they take the key and they hold it or something. They don't let it go in a way. That sense of return that is literally such a touchy, up and down of the water. Was this collaborative? Was this a friendship? Will these collaborations lead to friendship? Will this lead to future encounters than one time or something? I feel like the ones that were successful are the ones I continued on, that I have meaningful friendships. It's the ones that I know I've grown from, versus the ones that cut you off and shut you down.

SG: Yes, yes. I had a conversation with someone about how they were running an arts organisation and they were talking to me about how they liked the people they were working with and they were friends, and they had come together initially as friends but then they'd taken a really deliberate decision in the early start of the process to go, we're going to have really clearly defined roles. They wanted to put an organisational framework in place, and for those people, it was to do with protecting themselves and each other from exploitation. They were like if we have a frame for what we're doing, we'll sort of know what the boundaries are for our work. I've been thinking about that because it's an organisational process that.. I don't quite understand the gesture of care they're telling me is in it, because it's not one I would have recognised from the outside of that relationship.

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CC: It's weird because I look at the history books, I think the most recent one in terms of like gallery exhibitions is Pelosi, Rauschenberg and John Cage, and you see that relationship and how they had those events that they hosted, and they've grown from those. Their own practice has surged with those relationships on top of it. I always see Glasgow right now as the millennial version of how people were represented in that kind of sense of camaraderie in New York and Berlin. It feels like it hasn't been dominant yet because it feels like the institutions have not been on top of it.

SG: Yes.

CC: They haven't really highlighted that, you can see the relationship of artists, live artists who have worked together or you can see that they were hanging out with each other in a way. I see that now with communities and artists, I think Project X is a good example with the artists I represented there. They're all good friends, they all work with each other with projects and they've kind of grown in that, that's the aim that you want as an artist when you feel like you're going to reach a certain point. Like a dynamic and a medium in a city that wants to have this flourishing stuff. I think it's interesting the difference between some of these institutions and I'm not going to lie, they literally don't highlight some of that group stuff enough yet. It feels like sometimes the curator is a little bit of a hover over that kind of representation that you can see with other groups and organisations, artists just working together. This is my last little rant, spiel, with artist-run spaces as well, the high priority of working as though you're thinking of an entire institution, even though that is supposed to be the initial crux of building, showing work, of artists working together to build that. The bureaucratic mentality destroys the craft sometimes.

SG: The thing that keeps going round my head and in lots of these conversations as I start to have them, is about how you create structures which foster artists or foster creativity and sort of sustain that work, and which are lasting but which don't calcify, which don't become this structural device that becomes the job of the structure. The job you do reproduces the structure rather serves whatever art might be within its walls. So yes, it's like how do you invent structures that can serve that task?

CC: Yes.

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SG: Certainly, a lot of the artist-led organisations in Glasgow and across Scotland, it feels like they're repeatedly asking that question.

CC: It's a very overwhelming consistent, repetitive question because it was I think that incident from Creative Scotland years ago, I'm calling it out, literally changed the dynamic of what it was meant to be. It kind of almost destroyed it, it almost led to losing them. It needs to be reminded of where do you think all of this came from for Creative Scotland? That sense of the artists who build up and that representation. That's what you want to represent and support [laughs] but there are a lot of hurdles now in terms of that. The government and finances and that kind of stuff.

SG: It's going to be interesting, it's all been postponed wildly because of the pandemic but Creative Scotland have been reviewing all of their long-term funding plans. That was supposed to be resolved by probably this time last year and it got extended. That was even after an extension, so who knows what will come.

CC: When everything kind of eases it's like which ones are going to sustain? Which mediums are going to be prioritised [laughs], which shouldn't be the case! It should be just support all artists because that's what defines your culture.

SG: Yes, yes. I have a friend who's baseline is stop making choices about art forms, give all artists a universal basic income. [Laughs] And just go from there!

CC: I agree with that completely. No categorisation because everyone wants to evolve from different mediums and resources, there are some people who stay in their lane and perfect it, but overall how do you want to have an international frame, because it's not global. You're representing yourself in a place that's global and independent. It's like you've got to give independence for the artists, the space and the freedom to hybrid that because when you pigeon hole, that's like academic institutions as well, it doesn't give you space! So you feel like you're not going anywhere unless you really are passionately invested in that. I think there's a higher percentage of multi-hyphenates versus perfectionists.

SG: Yes, I think so. It's so funny, maybe it's another conversation for another day.

CC: [Laughs].

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SG: So much of the money in Creative Scotland historically, it's my job to find out quite dull facts and then report them excitedly, so much money for performance art and for live art has historically come from dance budgets. I'm still trying to work through what that says, was it just to do with the particular configurations of people in the room, was it because the mixed arts officer had better relationships with the dance people. There's a story being told there that I don't know yet.

CC: It's probably the resources that were demanded from performance artists is similar to the dance and the stage and you have to have that connection. Basically, The Work Room is like a huge hybrid of those combined, giving a lot of freedom and space for it and I think it always taken into consideration all of the different categories or branches I would say. It sustains into one thing.