

Live Art in Scotland: Anne Bean

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Anne Bean (AB): The reason I mention the seventies is that it was just so significant for me - that very early [Richard] DeMarco curated show at Edinburgh, you know, Strategy: Get Arts, was something really substantial in how it's inspired [and] basically opened up a whole space of possibilities. I think that's been quite a formative influence, apart from [Joseph] Beuys, the whole atmosphere of the place, and the whole headiness and the extraordinary openness of potential and ways of using materials and interacting.

Stephen Greer (SG): What do you remember of that exhibition? Or that programme of work?

AB: Oh, I remember it well. You know, not 'well', I mean, it's a blur, but the bits and pieces. I remember the atmosphere was just so vital, and I was just happy to feel this real tribal sense of minds together. And that you could share [in] this expansive way of being and doing, and this spontaneity [as well]. When I think about it, a lot of the work actually took a lot of doing and influenced a lot of work since. I mean, the Beuys piece with the pack [The Pack (das Rudel)] was a very obvious space of how a poetic reality, and political and social reality come together. So that was just very provocative in arts ways of working. He also did performances there, I think, the Scottish symphony [Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch) Scottish Symphony]. I remember this corridor of knives [Günther Uecker's Sharp Corridor], I remember this big, snaking water as you got in the door [Klaus Rinke's water installation at the entrance to ECA Main Building]. Just all sorts of things where the visceral reality of the piece involved one, so you became inevitably a performer. You couldn't escape. And I love that thought, you know. I love that somehow these provocations forced one to be part of this. So that was very much a Scottish huge gift.

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And DeMarco was pretty remarkable, that he pulled it off. I mean, that's where you just think [about] the very little support he got. I think he brought about 30 artists from Germany, and it was just the most astonishing event. And I went up in an old ambulance I'd bought and slept, on the streets and just felt very much part of it, especially with Beuy's VW. And then a room of mist [Adolf Luther's Focusing Room]. Things that [came] much later, like Antony Gormley's [Mist Room] were very much present in that situation. But anyway, Steve, we'll jump to the 80s..

SG: It's so interesting hearing you talk about that [work], because the legacy of that exhibition is still really present, even when there is a generational gap of people who weren't present for it. And I think particularly Joseph Beuys and the idea of social sculpture is turning up again in these conversations. So maybe we will come back to that idea in relation to your work.

AB: Yes. Well, I was surprised that in one way [that] didn't have more impact because for me, it was just so seminal and so astonishing. All these people had all this energy together. There was one woman - or I don't know if there was more than one woman involved - [called] Dorothea Iannone [showing] all these erotic drawings and just really 'in your face' stuff. [I remember] just thinking, all these things are just so permission-giving and so liberating. I mean, all those old corny words but it's so true. It's such an empowerment, and I think I did go away from there just feeling so uplifted. And I think back and think I wonder why seemingly, I don't know.. I'm glad to hear you say its resonance remains, because it often seems to me that for such a powerful intervention in a city and in a space, people don't seem to know enough about.

SG: Yes, I'm not quite sure why there is a sort of amnesia. Maybe that's too strong a word but there is an absence around its remembering. And I wonder whether it is to do with the really strong institutional memories attached to things like the Edinburgh International Festival, which has the status of a certain kind and has the money of a certain kind. [I wonder] of that's part of the dynamic of it. One of the things that I suppose I was interested in asking about [was] the start of the 1980s [and] thinking about some of the projects or some of the collaborations that you were working on. Partly because I think it's really hard to think about your practice in terms of like, discrete events when it feels more like a continuum of practices.

AB: Well, I'm glad you feel that because that's how I see it. Yes. The 80s was - if I'm going to define my practice - I had started working with Paul Burwell at Butler's Wharf in the mid to late 70s. And that practice was intensified then in the early [80s] and that was when we also started to work more with Richard Wilson and with Steven

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Cripps who was a pyrotechnic sculptor, and Richard Wilson was a sculptor. And then so ideas were starting to fizz and ferment towards the Bow Gamelan Ensemble, which Richard Wilson, Paul Burwell and myself set up in 83. And yes, in terms of Scotland, we did do several works organised.. I'm not sure, I was trying to think about it. I think the first one was 86 in Dowanhill [in] Glasgow. I don't know if Lois Keidan was involved. It's difficult to remember how these things came about but we had this week long residency in Glasgow with this group of maybe a dozen students [at Glasgow School of Art]. People like Graham Fagan, Christine Borland and Douglas Gordon, Roddy Buchanan, Ross Sinclair, a whole lot of people who have later on said that we were seminal evidence to them. It's nice to feel that one could add on this sort of free flowing energy, in that sort of way. Because all their work is very different.

But they had been participating in this sort of real sense-around piece where we just got them doing all sorts of things. Like we had these pyrophones, for instance. that we set up. Maybe 100 different size pipes all around the space, and people had these propane gases. And you could put [the flaming gases] in and out of these pipes and just make this huge organ of sound around the space and, and really get the whole air vibrating and pulsing. And just the sense of joining in, even if you're just ringing a small bell, if you're all doing it, sending it around the space, something really astonishing happens. The fact that you could look at your old washing machine that had broken down and see what's going on inside and what the drum could do and.. just giving [and] just passing on permissions and possibilities to work and explore materials in whatever way. So that was a pretty intensive weekend. The performances were really fantastic in terms of people just contributing great energy into the space.

And [the art school at] Downhill.. part of the buildings was this church which had this spire which had been closed off for, I don't know, like 50 years before or something because it was supposedly unsafe. Anyway, we.. this is a really strong memory of going up into this belfry and ringing those bells like at two o'clock in the morning, Paul, Richard and myself. Kind of pretty dangerous because we were hanging right out and, and then.. what I loved was, one was almost conducting this whole sound and light show because you'd start to see lights coming on from the houses around, and then they spread out and out. And then you'd see police cars coming towards us. So we has these blue flashing lights, these lights from all these houses coming out. And then this whole [group of] people looking up. It was like we conducted this huge operatic piece with people shouting 'what are you doing?' And the police climbing up to this belfry. [laughter] So that's a very strong memory from Glasgow.

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SG: It's making me think.. the names of those students, those artists, I think most of them, maybe all of them were at Glasgow School of Art. And so I think they would have been in what's now called Sculpture and Environmental Art. So it was David Harding and Sam Ainsley who were there.

AB: That's right, Sam and David. They were very involved. Because later on Sam Ainsley was involved, when we did a kind of retrospective that I always think became a sort of future perspective. In Dundee's Cooper Gallery, with Sophia Hao, Sam Ainsley was.. on the way on the symposium, we were talking about all of that. And Graham Fagan was also talking about it and talking about it being a really.. a very influential, atmospheric time for him, that whole period. And because we hung out with them, you know, in the same way as I was speaking about Edinburgh earlier on, where you just hung out with the people. So it wasn't just the work, and the exchanges just became part of a whole.

SG: I'm thinking that the other part of that situation is the Third Eye Centre because I know that you performed there later on, but that's literally in that neighbourhood as well.

AB: Yes, the Third Eye Centre.. yes, it's difficult separating out which.. I don't know if the Third Eye Centre actually was part of commissioning the Dowanhill [work] or... Because we certainly spent a fair amount of time in Glasgow. Or if we did something at the Third Eye Centre at the same time, or if we came back? But I mean, maybe you've got it in your archive?

SG: I'm starting to unravel a bit of the detail. I know that you were that you were up in 1988 for the Glasgow Garden Festival,..

AB: The Garden Festival! Which was a disaster on a sort of magnificent scale, though.

SG: What was disastrous about it?

AB: [laughs] The main disaster was that the weather just like a typhoon, I mean, we didn't have an audience. And they kept saying, 'well, don't do it'. Well, we were set up, ready to go. So we just said, 'no, we've got to do it'. So it was unseeable, unhearable. It was on the Clyde [near] the docks and we had these big barges and we'd set up this huge thing. And so pyrotechnics were just spluttering into rather pathetic bits of smoke, you know. But actually it was for us - because there wasn't an audience you know - pretty intense. It was like 'just keep the

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damn thing going', you know. And I think.. oh, instruments were just being blown into the water. So we always think about.. Richard and I talk about getting a deep sea-diver just to go down [to see] if there's this ancient bits of Bow Gamelan instruments lying at the bottom, sort of sadly being rung by a passing fish. [laughter]

SG: I love that image because I'm sort of tempted to.. I could probably work out where on the river that would be..

AB: It would be wonderful, it would be a piece in itself just to see because.. we'd often [think] oh that beautiful bell tree, I wonder if its on its side there, slowly undulating in this underwater opera. Yes, so that was a disaster in one way, pretty intense in another way. And we also had a couple of students who, you know, we told all of them to go who didn't feel safe but a couple stayed. I remember their faith was just completely.. terrified.

SG: I think I read an interview with.. it might have been a three-way interview [with Bean and the other members of Bow Gamelan] talking about risk, or saying that you didn't ever have to fill out a health and safety form or complete a comprehensive check of risk back during the 80s and maybe 90s. That just wasn't really part of the landscape.

AB: No, it's miraculous, really. I mean, when I think of 20 propane gas flame jets in one space. And I think it was pretty much a wooden space, I think we were on wooden platforms there.

SG: Going back to that earlier thread it, I know that you were there in 1990 as part of Bow Gamelan who were there in 1990 for the National Review of Live Art - and that was at the Third Eye.

AB: 1990?

SG: Yes.

AB: You see, I think that was Paul then. Because Richard and I finished at the very beginning of 1990, Steve.

SG: Okay, so maybe you weren't at that one.

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AB: So Paul took it. And also we just became a very different sort of group. But I have got in our CV Third Eye Centre, it does say Third Eye Centre earlier on. Like I said, I don't know if Third Eye Centre were just part of that commission for Dowanhill.

SG: Okay. I'll go back and [check]. I'm going [into the archive] on Friday.

AB: I'd be curious. There are certainly different photos that seem to suggest The Third Eye. There's an article in The Scotsman, I should have looked it up, that's certainly there with pretty good photos. We did try and get hold of them for that work in Dundee, but I don't think we had any luck. But they might well have some photos. And that might be the Third Eye.

SG: The Third Eye [collection] in the CCA archive is pretty good. Quite a few gaps in it. But I'm going in at the end of the week, I'll have a look..

AB: I'd be curious what times, you know, because certainly we could have been back a few times. Well, we were [back] and from Dowanhill, we did go to Edinburgh, to the cathedral, St. Mary's, which was also a really astonishing event up there. It was really very beautiful, actually, because we had this whole cathedral and you knew the sound in a cathedral is so resonant. And we certainly worked with all of that. And the provost.. you do call it the provost up there? He was such a fantastic man. He was so supportive, because we set up our whole ensemble all around the cathedral but also underneath [the statue of] Christ on the cross, which was this huge Christ overhanging all these instruments. And obviously, people were used to coming in and, and kneeling and saying their prayers. So it was this very pagan looking setup where people were kneeling, seemingly in front of our instruments looking up [laughter] It was always such a powerful image to me.

We also started to experiment with these, flares outside the stained glass up during the performance and things like that, but well, fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know, there was a huge lightning storm. We seem to have had real weather! [laughter] And it was actually nothing to do with us but it cracked.. one of the windows cracked. And we started to think that the provost is going get sort of some kind of vibe of 'this isn't a good idea all around.' But actually he stood up before our performance and gave this most touching speech about how he'd come from a rural community, and how we had inspired him to love the urban energy of [the city] and how he'd really come to appreciate what at first he felt very sketchy about, [and] how he was drawn into all our try-outs and all the sounds and how we'd been so perceptive about the sound and the cathedral. So it was

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incredibly, incredibly supportive. And he later on - because we tried then to be involved with St. Paul's Cathedral in London - he even wrote to the dean there to say that it had been a brilliant experiment. So that was great in Edinburgh.

SG: I'm curious about the place of improvisation in that work, of knowing on the one hand there is the practical reality of trying to play in a storm, let's say, and the demand of trying to physically bring those materials together or source them if you're working with found objects, and then the register of improvisation in performance itself. But maybe it doesn't make sense to separate out those stages. But could you say something about that improvisation in that practice or that element of your practice?

AB: The improvisation very much was to do with space, you know like I was saying, just sort of feeling out the cathedral, for instance, [finding out] how sound would bounce across the space and between the space and resonate across? Our first performance together had been literally under Tower Bridge in a boat. We, Paul and I had started to try things out just by going on boat trips and things and recognising how bridges create this echoing ambience. So we were very much geared towards improvising those between each other, and with what the space was offering. And also by just trying it out a lot. When we did something on the Southbank, just recognising that the buildings behind were like a huge shield of reverberation that threw sound across the river. So we got more and more attuned to those sort of bigger spaces and how it worked, as well as in a much more intimate ensemble, just sort of listening to each other, within this very, very loose scoring that we did.

SG: That's lovely. I'm interested in how those kinds of processes or forms of responsiveness are turning up in other elements of your practice, and I'm trying to think about how to approach that without drawing too much of a straight line. I'm just going to ask you directly about one work that I'm interested in because I came to it slightly sideways. So - a few weeks ago, I was in Bristol, to the archive [which holds] the Record of Live Art Practice and a few other collections. And I was watching some video documentation of Derek Jarman showing the camera crew around the installation he'd made in the Third Eye Centre for the National Review of Live Art that one year. I came to it having talked to another artist who had been working at the Citizens Theatre, and I discovered he'd been involved in actually physically making [Jarman's] installation. And then I came to your work, *Under my Breath*, I think it's called..

AB: Oh my goodness, I didn't even remember that. How strange..

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SG: And so you described it, I think either on your website or somewhere else as a sort of requiem for Derek Jarman..

AB: Yes, Oh, I came up... well, I was going to do another piece and Derek died very shortly before. What happens when somebody dies, they sort of fill ones being with their being. And I just kept thinking of [how] he was also such a presence at Butler's Wharf. He just had this.. he brought people together and he also had these very intimate gatherings where people would show eight millimetre films and things like that. I mean, I didn't know Derek that well but just that long term connection, you know, just living in Butler's Wharf. And yes I did this piece which was these.. I don't know if you want me to describe it?

SG: Yes, that would be lovely

AB: Where was it? Do you know where it happened, was it.. ?

SG: I think it was staged at the Arches.

AB: It was at The Arches yes because I couldn't go out..

SG: What I know is that you started inside, then you went outside to release balloons or lanterns..

AB: Well, what I did was I had these buckets with a light in and a piece of grass on top, and fine sugar on top of that. And I had all these moulds of angels, and it was quite a clear mould that you see through all these different angel faces. But then I went and buried my own head into these angel faces whilst basically reading Derek's words: 'bliss in my ghostly eye, kiss me on the lips, on the eyes, our name will be forgotten in time, no one will remember our work, our life will pass, like the traces of a cloud and be scattered like mist that is chased by the rays of the sun. For our time is the passing of a shadow, and our lives will run like sparks through the stubble, I place a delphinium bloom upon your grave'. And it's just so beautiful. And I just sort of breathed my face in while saying these words into each one. And then I can't remember if I had these lit-up blue balloons, helium balloons, at the end of [the action] and just took them out and released them one by one into the sky. These blue lights in the sky..

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SG: That's beautiful. I'm interested [in] that the gesture of the balloons going up into the sky. And there is.. I'm conscious of how often you've chosen to work with actions which can't be repeated or which you've deliberately chosen not to return to. And yet there is a body of your work which is if not to do with re-performance [then] is to do with re-encountering or re-exploring or troubling the temporality of a singular event. I suppose I'm just wondering about the Arches and the National Review at that moment as a sort of space of possibility. What was the invitation like to make work? Was it simply where you were approached as an artist and asked to do something, anything? Or was there a more involved conversation about what might be possible, given the material space of the building or the kinds of support you might be offered?

AB: I think it was different [on different] occasions, Steve, but certainly I remember it being just very open and I don't know if it was because I knew the space a bit that I chose that or if Nikki [Milican] had sent images of one. You know, now it's so easy, you think of opening your email and seeing all these images. I'm just thinking probably it was probably a phone call where somebody would say 'well, we've got this long sort of open space here', or 'do you want this closed space?' Or maybe they'd just put you in in a space but you know, I don't remember the exact coming about of all of those sorts of things. I think it was pretty open. Obviously, if you were a group like the Bow Gamelan, then they'd expect something very specific. But I think when I'm invited to do something, I think it would be accepted that it could be a huge range of possibilities.

SG: Okay. So when you came back to.. I don't know, it's had a few different lives.. Falling in Love With The Chair?

AB: Yeah, Falling in Love With The Chair.

SG: Maybe we just talk about the different versions of that work, because I know that it comes from a memory of being at Reading University. Well, that's one of its roots. And then it becomes this performance action working with.. I'm going say like luminescent paint or tape on a chair?

AB: Well, basically, it's electro-luminous wire but it's like those necklace-y things that you wear, you know. But basically, I'm the chair with this electro luminous [material]?

SG: And then it becomes part of the Shadow Deeds series?

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AB: Yes. It had been part of that. I had this memory [of] basically arriving at Reading University. I'd come from Zambia, and I [only] really had this one suitcase. And it was in this, you know, big hall of residence, really. And there was this desk and chair and cupboard and bed. And I didn't want to open my suitcase - it all seemed like this fulcrum of a new life there. I didn't know anyone. And the chair happened to be one of those cane chairs and with a wooden back, and I just suddenly, sort of felt this realisation that the chair.. that the straw of the seat had once been grass, you know, outdoors, and that the wood had once been a tree. And suddenly, it seemed to really resonate with me that, from these wide open spaces, we were in this room together. I just certainly felt this kinship with this chair, and I just started to just sort of move it around. The memory is very, very vague of actually having danced with it. But I certainly felt a strong kinship and sort of felt this sense of sharing and experience: a long, long term ancestral experience with it. And yes, I did that performance with a chair for Shadow Deeds. Autobiography was the overall title and the 'shadow deeds' was each of these memories of pieces of work. What is it? 'Electric man kisses night to bring the light [to those who need] to hide one's shadow deed'. From Captain Beefheart? And, yes, so I was trying to think back to performances that had meant something to me and that was without realising it was one. You know, I didn't even know the word performance. So but that was one of the memories that I used in that.

SG: You've already mentioned - or we talked about in passing - working at the Cooper Gallery in Dundee with Sophia Hao. How did those projects come about? Because I think there's been a couple of those..

AB: Yes, we've done a lot at Cooper Gallery. Sophia has been extraordinarily supportive. And I must have met her at LADA [the Live Art Development Agency] because she worked with Lois [Keidan]. Or I don't know if she worked with Lois or just was involved in some project and we started to talk through various possibilities. Her whole series Of Other Spaces: Where [Does] Gesture Become An Event [included] the 12 Action Group [symposium]. I was very involved with both of those iterations. I think before that, even Steve, I'd been involved. In fact, Richard Wilson and myself were going up and Richard Strange was putting on something at the Arches. What was it called? I think I wrote it down somewhere - Cabaret Futura, New Moves in Glasgow 2011. So we had been invited and so Sophia invited Richard and I, we had just done this piece TAPS because Paul Burwell died in 2007. And I had made this video of contributions from about 80 improvising practitioners. And I'd also made this film Past where I did a looking back interview with Paul taking lots of bits of [footage of] him talking, and then me asking him questions from now, and looking into all his notebooks. Sophia was doing a season of collaborative and improvisatory practice, and invited me to show that film and for Richard and I to do a talk

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afterwards. So that was our first engagement with Cooper Gallery, and then going on back to Glasgow, to do that piece that Richard Strange had organised and curated.

SG: It's interesting to me that those projects with the Cooper Gallery are about.. what they seem to have in common is an interest in collaborative action. And also a little bit of a mining of your own archive, or a questioning of what that might constitute - I know that in the second of the Other Spaces episodes that you were working with archival footage of Moody and the Menstruators.

AB: Yes, that's right. I did. I shared us doing Wild Thing, I was doing 'I'm sick to death of hearing things from uptight, short-sighted, narrow-minded hypocrites', that John Lennon song, and sort of fusing them together. It's so interesting because, you know, one of our first big performances as Moody and the Menstruators was at Edinburgh, at the festival.. in 73? Yes, 73. And, you know, it just became one of those cult-y things. We suddenly sold out, you know, we were having to put on loads of extra shows, you know, so much to our astonishment. So, yeah, so it was a nice [return] back to sort of Scottish roots there.

SG: I'm slightly mindful of time, and I'm trying to keep these conversations to an hour, just because people's time is precious. But the last thing I wanted to ask you about - and this perhaps loops conveniently back around to the start of our conversation - was about some of those philosophies or ideas that were coming out of Edinburgh [Strategy Get] Arts and coming out of a practice which is challenging this separation between life and art. And I think I found - I think it's quoted in Dominic Johnson's book - a text you'd written during the period when you were living as Chana Dubinski, suggesting that the more provocative position than than saying 'everyone is an artist' is saying that no one is an artist, but that art is actually just an implicit part of living. And I was particularly drawn to your use of expression 'life art' rather than 'live art', [which I read] somewhere else. Maybe it's also in Dominic's book. And I just wonder if we could just finish with that idea of 'life art' rather than live art? Does that [idea] still hold true for your practice?

AB: Well, all definitions are problematic but necessary, Steve. But if I had to choose anything - life art or , live art - can we live art without changing anything but the pronunciation? So, you know, there's all those ways of just opening up these areas. And whatever gives more.. I was going to say expansiveness to the term you know? So I think if I had to choose, I would go with life art. Yes, but it doesn't roll off the tongue. [laughter] Maybe that's good. Maybe give pause for thought.

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SG: Glorious. Well, maybe that's a really good place to stop there. That was so that was gorgeous. Thank you for being so generous with your time and with your memories. That's really lovely. I often run down the river: I've run into town and run along the Clyde. So I'm going to now be thinking about silent bells underneath the water. [laughter] And when I'm in the archives on Friday, I'll see what I can find.

AB: Anything interesting comes up, Steve, that's the thing. Archives versus memory. Sometimes it's a difficult one because sometimes you see a photo and you think, oh no, it's not at all like I remember.

SG: And the archives can be so misleading. You know, there is a photograph of what happened, but it doesn't..

AB:...it just doesn't give the reality. It's just a photo, it's not transcending.