

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

This interview was conducted online via Zoom on 21st 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 recently by asking people about their sort of first encounters with dance or performance or live art or theatre and even though I'm wary of origin stories, and I think I get that from Dee Heddon, I really do like the idea of first encounters or first impressions. So maybe we could just start there, how did you come into this working in this field?

Anita Clark (AC): I danced from a really, really young age. I think I was about 2 and a half I went to my first class. Ballet, and then ballet tap, modern stage, jazz, highland dancing. I think that was a real important part of my childhood and just what I loved and what I wanted to do. I had a ballet teacher in my teenage years who was really honest [laughs] about my capabilities and skills and that I wasn't going to be a ballerina but then sought out other things for me to do. So, that was growing up in Helensburgh and then I became part of a youth dance group with Pete Royston who was most recently in Perth and ran in Glasgow, which at that time would've been Glasgow Art Centre on Washington Street. This was late eighties and that was the first time I encountered contemporary, taking the ballet shoes off, working in bare feet and I also did some workshops with Rosina Bonsu about that age as well. It was the first time I was encouraged to think creatively in dance, rather than just learn steps. With the youth group, we did performances down at the garden festival and things that were really important in terms of that passion, that this is what I want to do, this is what I want to be involved in, that expanding idea of what dance was. I remember

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

participating in the second ever Scottish Youth Dance Festival in 1989 and working with dancers who were in wheelchairs or had learning disabilities, and with Phoenix Dance Company of black men from Leeds, which was quite different to what I was used to encountering in Helensburgh and so that sense of eyes opening to different experiences. I went on and trained as a dancer, quite a traditional training. I was in ballet class every morning [laughs].

SG: Where was that? Where did you train in ballet?

AC: A place called London College of Dance.

SG: Okay yes, yes.

AC: It's not there anymore, and at that time it was in Bedford, but also did community education focus, choreography focus through it and so I came out of that very much as a practitioner, and that's kind of what I did. I came back to Glasgow and picked up bits and pieces of work: teaching and choreographing and working with different community groups. I just kind of gradually started realising you had to kind of instigate things yourself as well, instead of waiting for people to ask you to do things because there wasn't that much of that going on [laughs]. Through that, I became more involved in organising over the years and then maybe less people were keen to step into those organising roles and I realised that other people were making much more brilliant creative work or community work than I was capable of doing and so maybe that was my niche.

SG: Okay.

AC: In terms of seeing work, some of those things I was involved in with Youth Dance, that was certainly...

SG: That was the first context for seeing stuff.

AC: Yes, for more contemporary work and through Scottish Youth Dance Festival, and then I was away at training when 1990 was on, down south, but I remember seeing DV8's Strange Fish at Tramway and Wendy Houston dropped in and that being such a kind of [gasps] moment and star connection thing. So yes, I guess that's where I start. Throughout my childhood, I was seeing Scottish ballet and musicals and all that kind of performance work, but that was when things started to open out a bit more, become a bit more experimental.

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

SG: Yes, so I guess there's that period where, as you say, Tramway is open for the first time. I suppose this is around this period where, I'm trying to think when Rosina set up Dance Bothy, maybe that was sort of in the mid-nineties.

AC: It was about that time as well, it was when I came back to Scotland in 1992.

SG: Okay, so with things like, New Moves also on your horizon, that's also around that time. The first three or four editions of that are being programmed across the city.

AC: And I would struggle in terms of memories, to know what was New Moves and what was Tramway's old programme. The Third Eye Centre. I remember as a student being back home in Scotland, back in Glasgow during holidays, just thinking you were the bee's knees hanging out at The Third Eye Centre because it was kind of cool beyond [laughs]

SG: What was it like as a space to hang out in?

AC: I remember a really brilliant café and bookshop, and so you could just get away with totally hanging out.

SG: So not that feeling that you have to buy a coffee every forty-five minutes to have a seat? [Laughs].

AC: Yes! Yes, and I definitely took part in some workshops and things, that would have been through New Moves. It was in the upstairs spaces. You would queue, and then the kind of tenement stairs would take you up to those spaces. So, doing residency with American choreographers, Patrik Widrig and Sara Pearson. I think that was my first summer after I graduated. Yes, actually thinking about it, that was very bold! [Laughs].

SG: What was bold about it? Going there as a graduate?

AC: Very bold for me because I'm kind of thinking about the other people that were in that room and space, who were much more experienced.

SG: So you've kind of suggested that you were moving into more organising roles. What for you was maybe the first project or job that you can think of, where you were like 'this is maybe my niche, this is what I'm doing'. I mean it's quite hard in retrospect to point to the first one, but maybe are there any that stick out, let's say, in your recollection?

AC: I don't even know if I'm there yet! [Laughs].

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

SG: [Laughs].

AC: I did this year-long job with what was still Glasgow Performing Arts and Venues, so it was before Glasgow Life was set up. It was a kind of year-long dance coordinator post, it was funded by Scottish Arts Council and Glasgow Life and Glasgow City Council and the arts development team. I don't really know what I did, but it was a year-long position. It kind of started with these are independent companies that could do with a bit of support, but it was really unclear and I probably spent ten months of it trying to work out what I was going to do, and just a lot of maybe trying to keep people in touch and things.

SG: Working with independent dancers or artists mainly?

AC: Yes I think that was the idea [laughs].

SG: I'm just thinking about threads running through your later practice and maybe your work with the work crew, that there's sort of been a recognition in different stages and different ways of a need of support for independent artists, or at least those who are working outside those sort of company structures of dance in Scotland across the UK.

AC: Yes, definitely. I mean I've done a bit of the big company stuff as well, I worked in an education team for Birmingham Royal Ballet for a couple of years and that was actually after the Glasgow job, and a little bit of what do I do now kind of thing. I'll look at the CV and see if I've got better dates. I managed a couple of projects for New Moves, more of their education and community ones. That must have been late nineties. That was before I went down to Birmingham so yes.

SG: Okay. So I'm just thinking around that time, this is when Steve Slater would have been at Tramway, so again thinking about what was being programmed there.

AC: Yes. Steve programmed me once. I don't think he programmed it at all [Laughs].

SG: Oh okay [Laughs].

AC: It was a Paisley Arts Centre platform.

SG: Lovely. So you went away or you moved out of Scotland for a job, as so many of us do, I think. You went to Birmingham for a while.

AC: Worked in Birmingham for a couple of years, 1998–2000.

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

SG: Yes. What prompted the return? Was it chance? Or desire?

AC: I had a husband to think about in Glasgow. And I had done enough of the big company thing and I'd gone for the Head of Department job and didn't get it.

SG: So that road had run its course?

AC: Yes, yes. I was like well I'm just going to do the same stuff again.

SG: And I suppose this is sort of around, well we're doing the linear narrative thing, do you then start working in and around the Scottish Arts Council around that period or is that later on?

AC: I hung around Glasgow for another year or so doing bits and pieces of things, and then went to Aberdeen, then managed City Moves in Aberdeen for four years, and then went to Scottish Arts Council.

SG: Okay, so I'm just thinking about the history of City Moves, were you the first Artistic Director? Very early on in its life?

AC: Yes.

SG: What was that context like? Was that similar to the types of projects that you worked on in Glasgow, in terms of working with independent artists, doing kind of community facing things and workshops and teaching?

AC: There was a very small independent scene in Aberdeen, in terms of artists. So it was much more about an engagement program and public classes and things, and projects so, yes. You know, even though it was a small community we were doing things to try and create opportunities. So again a lot of the people who were doing maybe freelance teaching things, creating, looking at places for them to be creative or ways for them to work with other choreographers and things so they had those different stimuli and stuff.

SG: Okay. So coming back to starting to work for Scottish Art Council, and I keep saying this is a private theory but I keep saying it to everyone, so I guess it's just a theory now!

AC: [Laughs].

SG: There's a really important relationship between the development of dance and contemporary dance in Scotland and also the evolution of live art. Part of that, for me, is the

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

way in which people working in dance were often working across dance, like a really expanded landscape of it, and are working in choreographic movement and getting programmed into things like The National Review. Also I'm conscious of, I just look through the Scottish Arts Council records, and I can see sometimes people who are very firmly attached to a tradition of live art are getting funded out of a dance budget. So I don't know what I'm asking, I'm thinking also about how candid you might want to be about what your work was like at Scottish Arts Council, but I suppose I'd be interested in your sense of that expanded landscape at that moment where you are working to support dance, but I'm imagining you're also getting a lot of people coming to you whose work is really pushing at the limits of the understanding of what a conventional understanding of dance might be?

AC: Yes, well I guess in terms of structure, and I would struggle to know timescales. So there wasn't a dance department in Creative Scotland until Cindy Sughrue became Head of Dance. The role was initially a Dance and Mime Officer, when mime was still a thing in the eighties, which I guess was maybe more that umbrella term that was overseeing, that was kind of a wee offshoot of the theatre department and Cindy worked for Scottish Arts Council in more of a performing arts role and I think probably did a lot of internal advocacy for dance to be seen more discreetly and distinctly and so there would've been a time like then, that was committee structures and things had then had all been dismantled before I joined. So I joined in 2004. Within my, which would now be called 'portfolio', we didn't use that! [Laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

AC: So within what I had responsibility for, because there was a combined arts department which had been dismantled at some point as well, and so within dance, what we looked after, we were in budget line at that stage because there were arts form budgets, there were some things that were cross art forms, so Edinburgh International Festival, Tramway, and New Moves International was funded as an organisation that did what was probably by that time New Territories Festival and NRLA. I think that New Moves and how it was placing dance within a more expansive area and sitting alongside the NRLA, was probably really critical to what you're saying, particularly in Glasgow. When I was reading your questions yesterday, I was like I don't know, I don't remember knowing much about or thinking, I'm not sure I would even know the term 'live art' until I went to Scottish Arts Council to be

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

honest, because I'd been to a lot of New Moves and was really involved in all that, I don't think I ventured so much into the National Review stuff. I might have seen particular things but not realised it was part of that so much. If I'm being honest I don't think it was a term I was very familiar or used much at all.

SG: Yes.

AC: A friend and colleague who, at Scottish Arts Council at that time I do remember saying to me, she kind of went, your job title should probably be Head of Dance, Festivals, Live Art and everything else that nobody else gives a shit about, because I think I just did have that kind like, oh it's all... I don't know what it was, but just kind of recognising that things often did fall between cracks within that structure that was so kind of departmentalised and that that felt odd to me.

SG: Yes, I think all of the discussions about companies which get regular funding, or not, is always the subject of the most public dispute or debate [laughs] and I don't especially wish to talk to you about that, not least because I think it might put you unfairly on the spot. What I am interested in though, and this is maybe just following the link through to The Work Room, is your sense of support for that independent sector, just because I feel like where live art overlaps with contemporary dance is particularly acute when it comes around independent practitioners, like that's the meeting place, or that's the meeting space maybe. So I guess my question is, is that where The Work Room's origins are in a sort of appetite for supporting independent artists in particular?

AC: Yes. I mean it was set up by a group of artists who had been advocating in the city for a long time about resource and lack of space for dance, and then the opportunity came in that Scottish Ballet got Arts Council and city funding for their new headquarters at Tramway. I'm sure that was initially horrific [laughs], it was kind of totally takeover, we're going to build production studios in T2 and all that.

SG: Yes, I've both talked to folk and seen the newspaper coverage at the time of yes, as you say, the plan to take over T2 and I think huge resistance from the visual art community, but also people who had been making performance in that space as well.

AC: Yes, I do remember being quite bold and going to speak to the man who was Chief Exec at Scottish Opera as well and that was a merger thing that never really got anywhere. And

just that you're kind of seeing it as, oh the visual arts are stopping these artists but actually you're putting independent dance commissioners in an awkward position as well, because what Tramway has created and supported and enabled and you know, is actually independent and much more aligned in the camp of visual artists than Scottish ballet which you know is [laughs] a different planet. But then that didn't go ahead, and then there was the extension in the derelict bit, and as a condition of that public funding, it was written in that they would create a studio resource for independent artists, and this brilliant group of women artists who set that were involved in all of those conversations about what the studio would be and how it would work and were just determined that it wouldn't be something that Scottish Ballet or Tramway would hire out or let them into, because they just saw the danger in that, and so set up The Work Room as the thing to initially manage the space to have agency over it and for it to be artist-led. So that's the membership structure we have, it's all come from that. So how we operate, I'm not in any way an Artistic Director, I'm not convinced that Director is the right job title, but that's kind of what I've got [laughs]. It's about facility and it's about holding space and things, so I actually think a lot of what I learnt through being in the funding body is really useful in terms of how I work. All of our opportunities and calls are all peer assessed, we have panels together and we endeavour in our planning and approach for that to be consultative and for members to feed into.

SG: I guess that maybe answers part of what I was going to ask you about next, which is about the breadth of practices which are represented in The Work Room's membership. That it maybe has its roots in dance, but against that sort of expanded horizon of dance and movement and choreography, and all the different things that those terms might refer to.

AC: So again, right from the beginning when it was set up, that was part of it, that it should not have a certain aesthetic connection, it should be, as you say, expansive in that way. That's something that we tried to hold on to and in some ways, I think at times we're still seeing it too much as a contemporary dance [organisation], and I think there's more that we need to be doing in terms of other dance forms. Where we are in Glasgow, to have one member who is a Bharatanatyam artist out of two hundred and twenty is not appropriate. I think there's more that we need to be doing to be more visible and embracing of a wider dance horizon maybe. We did some work a few years ago and kind of came down with that,

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

it's about dance, movement and choreography, rather than just dance artists and it's kind of an ongoing conversation. I guess at the heart, wanting to be open and build that, but then also being realistic about the scale we are and how we can do it and our membership is now over two hundred and twenty. And seeing that as a much more Scotland-wide thing rather than just a Glasgow thing, you know just members from around Glasgow, so yes, it kind of excites and scares me.

SG: Yes, just from what you're describing, from also from conversations I've had with other folk, there is this sense of competing imperatives and things you've got to balance, and also the weight of ambition that might come with the sector in the absence of other development opportunities [for] an organisation like The Work Room to be all things when as you say, the scale you're at and the resources you have, there's always a limit to what one organisation can do.

AC: I think one of the things that we do tussle with is that it feels really important in terms of how we're set up and why, that sense of community and support and peer support. I get nervous at times when it feels like actually, we maybe contribute to that sense of competition rather than being an antidote to that, and I think that's something that we're very conscious of and are working through really.

SG: Is that the sensibility that informs your process and the wider sort of development and support work that The Work Room does? So I know that the residencies are kind of core to it, but also that there are the advice surgeries and workshops and other things. It's always interesting to me, how does workshop training sit next to attempting to promote that kind of collegiality or non-competitiveness when training does involve a recognition of expertise or hierarchy. So how do you create a space?

AC: Yes so a lot of that. We try to do it responsibly. People will say we'll come with, or we'd like to do this, or there's a group of us that want to work with this artist. So we work quite responsively or to things that we know are going on in the city through festivals or programming things. Over the past year we have really focused that in terms of member-led [activity], so kind of peer learning. You know that kind of ongoing invitation within the membership to suggest things that they would like, whether it's conversations, or sharing things that they're working on or bringing groups together to look at things.

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

SG: I'm interested in maybe how that relates to that wider thing you were talking about, the particular art forms or dance or movement traditions that are being reflected by the membership. So on the one hand, a member-led process might be a really great way of expanding the forms that are represented, but also at the same time it's a dynamic which might just reproduce more of the same [laughs] because artists you know, will want to work in the form that they want to work in and that might be their chosen form, [and] they might not necessarily invite in artists from other practices. Certainly some artists do, that's what drives their work and then there's you and the other members sort of sitting in the middle trying to negotiate those demands I suppose.

AC: And you know, yes I nudge and suggest and put things in, and kind of respond and maybe seek out members who are maybe not coming forward so much with suggestions and need a bit of encouragement and invite them and see what happens really [laughs].

SG: Okay, so there's an aspect of internal advocacy within the members of The Work Room, as you say nudging people forward who might not have considered the possibility?

AC: Yes.

SG: This is maybe where we break from the tidy linear conversation having gone through time. I'm really conscious of the way in which the broader landscape, particularly in Glasgow but also across Scotland, has shifted over the last twenty years in terms of the new festivals that have appeared but also the organisations and structures which have either come to an end through agentful choices by producers but have also been forced to close. I'm really conscious of the loss of The Arches and we talked about The Third Eye centre and that obviously transitioned into the CCA in a slightly messy but ultimately productive way [laughs]. I'm interested in your sense of where there are spaces and places for this kind of experimental or maybe research-led work as well? Because for me it feels like a lot of the choreographic work that's coming out of The Work Room residencies are to do with, or informed by, research into what dance and movement might do, or what it might show, or how it might engage with the world. What's your sense of like that broader landscape and how it's changed over time? It's a huge topic, I can be more specific if it would help! [laughs] After The Arches closed, did you feel like there was more pressure on The Work Room to make space for artists who would previously have been offered residencies or development space at The Arches?

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

AC: Yes, or people that would have maybe naturally been there. I remember having similar conversations with Fiona Sturgeon Shay at Playwrights' [Studio Scotland] and kind of going, we're expanding our ideas of what a playwright is because you know, there were artists who had had that home in The Arches who were needing to find other connectors and things. But what actually neither us nor the Playwrights' Studio do that The Arches do, is provide that connection with audiences and that space for audiences and I do think that's been a massive loss in this city. As you say it's evolutionary and Take Me Somewhere's come through that and I think the spaces for performance and bringing audiences and artists together, there's more needed of it. And it's maybe to be rethought in some ways as well, or it's maybe something that the same level of, or same depth of thinking that goes into practice and what that would look like, and maybe that's something that does start to become opened up, particularly in this past year. I think there will be more outdoor work and public work that's starting to come through.

SG: A lot more digital work and it feels like that screen dance has been given an interesting shot [in the arm], not that it wasn't already really active and vibrant but it feels like it's been pushed in more unexpected new directions, maybe. One thing that people have observed to me, and it's interesting, I'm having these conversations now which are informed by twenty other conversations, that with The Arches, the loss was about both the loss of the physical space but also the kind of community of people. But obviously there were question marks around that community and of who felt they could belong in that building or not, but I'm wondering whether you have a sense of that as part of The Work Room's remit of creating a space of potential community for people who are working in this field and also committed in some way to a spirit of experimentation?

AC: I mean very much so. We talk about that a lot and our values that were articulated through an exercise with members a few years ago, are about experimentation, inclusivity and something else! Generosity! [Laughs].

SG: I was literally about to turn my head to my other screen because it's got The Work Room's website open [Laughs].

AC: We did a wee print thing.

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

SG: So inclusivity and experimentation are the maybe the ones where I kind of go, okay I know what that means, but what does generosity mean in the context of your work?

AC: I think it can come out in different ways, but that sense of what you bring to being a member of The Work Room as well as what you get from it. We try to communicate that and communicate that when people become members and it's small things, it's like saying 'come and share in what other people are doing'. So we've been doing more of these things online, but, if people are doing residencies in studio and would like people to come along to that. It doesn't matter if you know them or not, come and see what's been going on and that's a way that you can show your generosity towards other artists in the membership. I do a fair bit of, 'oh would you mind having a chat with someone about that because they're doing this' and I know you've done that before, or 'could you come along and speak at this because I think you've done brilliant work in this and I know others would really appreciate hearing it'. So yes, I think that sense of, in a way it feels very old-fashioned [laughs], what can you give, not just what you can get.

SG: And it feels like a sort of positioning which is maybe quietly, or even loudly, resistant of a version of The Work Room as a sort of service provider which is like 'we give you classes' and 'we give you X numbers of hours of workshop space', which.. there's value in that, but if that's all that you do, maybe you're missing a trick [laughs].

AC: Yes.

SG: There were one or two things that I was sort of curious about, and we are now jumping around a bit. I'd mentioned in my email to you that I was curious about an infrastructure report that had been done into Live Art in Scotland, and just looking at the dates there and knowing when you were working at Scottish Arts Council, was that a piece of research that you'd been involved in?

AC: Yes, I instigated it.

SG: Yes, that was my sense, but I wasn't sure.

AC: I was trying to remember, but I think probably kind of opportunistically, I think there was the potential to bid for internal research money. I think it will have come from a place of, maybe feeling that live art was quite, as we touched on earlier, hidden within Scottish Arts Council. There was definitely practice within visual arts and there was New Moves

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

sitting within dance and other things coming through dance, but maybe feeling that put a lot of opaqueness, that's not a word [laughs], for artists in terms of approaching Scottish Arts Council at that time. Probably some internal advocacy for the work. Yes, I'm just glad you've got a copy of it because I don't know that I have.

SG: Oh! I'll have to email it to you! Yes, no I found it.

AC: The website stayed live for years and I used to direct people to it for various resources and then actually quite recently I noticed it wasn't live anymore! [Laughs].

SG: Yes, I noticed and there was quite a lot of loud swearing that day. You can get some of it through the internet archive website, but a lot of it has just vanished.

AC: There were some brilliant and probably quite dated now, kind of resource help sheets around kind of constitutions and I would often send it to folk.

SG: The report was 2007, and prior to a huge, you know, series of very consequential things [for the sector] - National Review of Live Art does thirty years then finishes by design and then the following year, New Moves closes, and then there's a period of The Arches maybe expanding to take over some of that territory in order to support that territory, and then The Arches closes. I think earlier on you talked about the sort of cyclical nature of this and I'm wondering if you have a view on that. Are there things that maybe would secure, or offer a more stable base for this kind of work? Is it do with commitments of organisations like Creative Scotland just putting more resources into it, or is there something about a greater emphasis on artist-led communities of different kinds, and again that's a huge topic but it struck me that you might have been thinking about this [laughs] in different ways for a while.

AC: I mean I think, timing wise for that report, I guess maybe the leverage that I hoped it would give just wasn't there and then it went into that whole Creative Scotland thing and it was a bit of a free-for-all. I think it's always more straightforward for funding bodies to fund organisations and I think that has a lot of limitations. So I guess a lot of my thinking was about what is it that artists need around them to be able to do their work most effectively and to do their best work. That model that we've maybe had more of in dance and theatre, and live art's always kind of resisted that. oh well, you get to a point where you set up your company and so often those company names are nothing more than that [laughs], and it is

Live Art in Scotland: Anita Clark

the same artist ploughing away. But you know, there was that kind of historical model that was, well, then they might get someone to work with them and then they might get a bit more project funding and get bigger and bigger, and then at some point they'll get revenue funding and then that makes it, you know, more secure. It's something that feels so unattainable for most artists who are now probably mid-career and who struggle to think of themselves as mid-career because they still feel that [they're] flailing around a lot. I would say that's a conversation I often have, even though they certainly have been practicing and they're often excluded from emerging artist schemes and things. And even when it was feasible to have that kind of trajectory, was that ever the best? Because it then becomes about running companies.. and I was just thinking about this in a conversation with someone yesterday and [in relation to] Janice Parker's work. Janice Parker became Janice Parker Projects and became revenue funded for three years, and then was unsuccessful in the last round, and Janice was quite circumspect about that and said it was hard for her to fit into that model, it didn't quite work in how she worked. So there was in some ways a sense of relief for her that it didn't happen, and I remember being much more angry about it! [Laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

AC: And kind of going, it shouldn't be about you fitting a structure! There should be enough flexibility in structures to kind of go, actually, this is an amazing artist who is doing brilliant work and really influential work and surely we can make this funding and reporting structure work around that? And so, you know this past year has just absolutely highlighted all that across the board; the vulnerability of precarious working and being freelance and it feels like there needs to be some more imaginative solutions.