

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

This interview was conducted online via Zoom on 19th 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 over the past few weeks by inviting people to think about their sort of first encounters with performance or with live art, or any kind of theatre and performance. I'm sort of suspicious of origin stories, I keep saying that as well, but I do like the idea of first encounters, or early memories or first impressions, so maybe we could start there.

Gemma Paintin (GP): I guess for me, first encounters with any kind of performance was pretty late. I grew up in Jersey in the Channel Islands and so it's not like there's loads of culture [laughs] so I didn't even do drama, it wasn't available as a subject actually until year ten – I don't know what that is in Scotland, you know GCSE, sort of fourteen/fifteen. I was very lucky to have a teacher who had trained at the place that I eventually went to, which was Bretton Hall. So, I think my sort of introduction to what theatre or performance might be, happened very late, you know, comparatively to lots of people. And then it came from a perspective of making. Growing up in Jersey you could go to the Opera House to see commercial shows that came in, or the Arts Centre which had the odd dance show, I don't know, Phoenix Dance Theatre or something so I saw a lot of that kind of stuff but nothing that was devised. But, without going into loads of detail about my school career, I was very lucky that my GCSE and A Level Drama Performing Arts teachers came from a devised theatre background. Although coming to that as a school subject pretty late, we never did any scripted work, ever, and I managed to get to university without never having even heard

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

of Stanislavski or Brecht. It was all devised, one-hundred percent devised. My first experience of theatre was making it and devising, and I think that's quite an unusual route in. My first experience of performance was as a maker, always as a maker, even at age fifteen. And then, again going to university at Bretton Hall, which was in the middle of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Wakefield is not really, well Wakefield is the closest city to where I lived, it's not really a cultural hotbed. More so now because there's a gallery and stuff but there wasn't when I went to university in 1999. My experience of performance and theatre was as a maker. I'd never heard the term, 'live art' probably until I don't know, 2006/2007. James [Stenhouse] and I did a Master's degree at the same time. We met at university, at undergraduate when we were eighteen and we both did a Master's at the same time, back at Bretton Hall in 2004/2005. No one ever used the term, 'live art'. I'd never heard the term, 'live art'. I just knew about theatre. I guess, just sort of because of my background in theatre, and what that was, it was very broad and so I didn't have a narrow idea of what theatre was. I had also, James and I, before we both came back to Bretton to do a Master's degree, we'd been living in Taiwan for a year. We were teaching English as a foreign language in the daytimes and then in the evenings working with a Taiwanese theatre company, which was all devised and mostly in Mandarin. We never knew what was going on anyway, so this was a really good basis for working as a theatre maker. It wasn't until we both finished studying and, looking back, I can remember a lot of the work I was interested in, and writing about, as a Master's student, now I could perhaps say it was live art. And then we started making some work together as we were finishing our Master's degree. We showed the first piece of work that we ever made, which was very short – it was a fifteen minute thing which we made with another guy, Pete Philips who was half of the company, Search Party – which we showed at the Green Room in Manchester as part of Emergency Platform in 2005. That was the first thing we ever showed publicly. It was only fifteen minutes, and it was called *A Western*, which was the first piece we ever made. Someone subsequently described that piece to us as live art. I didn't even know the term, I just considered it to be theatre. We just were making stuff that we wanted to make, and it was being described back to us as live art so that's kind of how we came to understand the term.

SG: When you say described by, is that by other artists, or producers, or critics or promoters?

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

GP: I think all of them. I think we were looking at, it's hard to remember the details of it, but we were looking at the work which seemed visible to us, I guess, or exciting. Like oh wow, you know, when you come out of education and realising, I didn't even know that this world existed. Coming out of that and seeing that there is this term that is live art and thinking, maybe that is what we're doing then or maybe that applies to us. But that was very much something that was very much put on from that, it was described from the outside rather than us connecting with the term deeply. And maybe that's something that we'll get to later on in the discussion. I just have lots of ambiguities about the term and how useful it is, how relevant it is. But in that initial stage, people had said to us this is what you're doing, you're making live art. I think that probably did come from curators and producers. I think back, of the first two years of James and I making work together in 2005–2007 I suppose, you know, when you're just trying to find your place or uncovering a scene if you like, it was like, oh yeah, people are saying this word. This thing, live art, is something different and it seems like we're sitting in that. It was sort of news to me in a way. [Laughs]

SG: Yes, that makes complete sense. I'm just thinking about the timeline of those first two years of making work and knowing then when you maybe first came up to Forest Fringe in Edinburgh. Was that your first contact with the Edinburgh Fringe environment or with Forest Fringe? How was that link made?

GP: We had been making the third thing we ever showed together which was probably a thirty-minute version of *A Western* at artsdepot in London. They had a thing called Depot Untapped [laughs]. We'd applied and been invited to perform something there. Laura McDermott, who is now director at ACCA [Attenborough Centre for Creative Arts] and at that time was producer of the BAC [Battersea Arts Centre], saw it and said to us, I really liked it, if you're ever in London, let me know and we can have a chat. We followed up with an email and pretended that we were just casually going to happen to be in London, but in actual fact we drove to London specifically to meet her for a fifteen-minute coffee just to say hello and pretended we hadn't specifically come to London just to meet her. And off of the back of that, we were invited to develop a piece of work through the BAC Scratch. We were invited to come and do something for the BAC Scratch, and we were developing a thing which never went anywhere called *How to Disappear*. That was probably in 2007 and we met Andy Field, who was the then press guy at the BAC when we were working in the

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

building. He said, I've got a book for you that I think you would like, which related to our project. It was about a disappearing elephant. He said, I'm doing this thing in Edinburgh, this venue in Edinburgh, do you want to come? This was probably early 2008. We'd never thought of going to Edinburgh, never been to Edinburgh for the Festival, I'd been outside the Festival but I just didn't think that was relevant to me, or interesting, it just seemed not on my radar at all. He invited us to come up to Forest Fringe, so we did. We went up to Forest Fringe in 2008, which was the second year of it. This was the second year, but it was the first year that Andy had been involved. We then participated in every Forest Fringe in Edinburgh until it finished. That's how that link came about. It's interesting because I think often, I look back and think how did I meet this person, or how did that come about, and for us, there's always a personal connection. You know, you meet someone who introduces you to someone else, who introduces you to someone else. Yes, so that's how we sort of became involved in Forest Fringe and we met Debbie for the first time.

SG: Do you remember what the experience of that early Forest Fringe was like, because that's obviously when they were still in the space above the café?

GP: [laughs] Yes. It was amazing. It was totally thrilling. It was brilliant. I absolutely loved Forest Fringe in that space because it was an all hands on deck situation. You just turn up and you can expect to be there every day for the whole week or whenever you're there. I really love that kind of thing of just, great, I turn up and now I'm cleaning the toilets, and now I'm running the box office, and now I'm clearing chairs in and out. That's like the joke Andy, Debbie and me always make: half the time spent at Forest Fringe in Edinburgh was moving chairs. It was just, I don't know, that was my first experience of the Fringe, which I subsequently realise is completely different to the rest of the Fringe. It was great and very much felt like, you do it yourself, let's just make it happen. It was a very freeing and exciting space to be.

SG: Am I right in thinking that that first year at Forest Fringe was *Watch Me Fall*, or an early version of *Watch Me Fall*?

GP: Yes, I think so. I can't remember the exact timeline but potentially that is what we did that first year. If it was that year, I think there are some photos of it. We showed fifteen-minutes of an unfinished thing. We needed a stage weight, no one had a stage weight. We had this ramp and we needed to weigh it down or else it would flip when James goes over it

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

on the little kid's bike. There were no stage weights. We tried to run across to Bedlam across the road to try and get one to borrow, which had a massive ten litre pot of paint which we wedged under and somehow, at a crucial moment in the show, I had to pull something out from under the ramp and I knocked the pot of paint and it just spilled and this massive thing of paint was just spreading its way across the floor. Nick from Paper Cinema suddenly was on the stage with me wiping up all of this paint with loads of bits of newspaper. And then you get the classic question afterwards – it was a work in progress, so we did a little Q&A afterwards – of someone being like, was that intentional? Was the paint thing part of it? And it's like, no, no it's not part of it. And then the classic follow-up of, maybe it should be. And it's like, no. It should not be part of it.

SG: [Laughs] I was at and around Forest Fringe in those early years. I don't think I saw that show because I was working in comedy at the time and so I had really strange working hours. There is something about the DIY-ness of that space which felt really important for how the work was being supported or the possibilities for the work there.

GP: Yes, definitely. It was just like, turn up and you can put something on. Whatever you want, just put it on. In return, we were all sleeping six people to a room and running all the box offices and doing everything ourselves. I think because it was artist-led, artist-focused, artist-run. As a person who was a couple of years out on university, albeit postgraduate, it didn't feel student-y, it's not that, but I guess you're used to being in a context where you're sorting stuff out yourself, doing it yourself, being quite self-sufficient in that way. There was nothing curatorial about it, which for me, is brilliant because it was just like we owned the space, and we just turn up and do it and that was a brilliant thing. Just to have a room that big. Most people at that stage, I mean that still happens now, the only place you get to rehearse is your bedroom or your front room if your housemates are out, so to have a space that big is amazing.

SG: I think, and I've spoken with Andy and Ira and I'm hopefully going to speak to Debbie in the next few weeks, that there was a sort of sense that, it's like one of things where I don't know if they knew at the time or if in retrospect that it was something they came to realise – that's happening a lot in these conversations, that retrospective uncertainty – that they were programming or they were attracting artists that were making work that wouldn't fit anywhere else in the fringe economy. Whether it was just the scale of the work or whether

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

it was the nature of the work, or whether it was the duration of the performance, and that sort of became a feature. Maybe it would be interesting to talk about whether you have a sense of how that Festival shifted over the years, because when it moved down to the Out of the Blue Drill Hall down in Leith, it felt for me at least coming in to it as an audience member, it had a slightly different energy to it. I don't know whether that was just because the building was different.

GP: I guess there's always the temptation to look back at something and overlay an organising principle on it, whereas actually, it's the other way round. The situation was as it was and so it's created a sort of series of situations after the fact. I think that what Forest Fringe was, was a group of people who were of similar age, at similar stages in their career, i.e., very early on, with a similar type of enthusiasm and attitude for a certain type and way of being that I don't think had much to do with the work. It was just like are you the sort of person who would really love to get up at seven o'clock in the morning, even though you've only gone to bed at three in the morning, to go and move a load of chairs? If you're really excited about that, which I am, if you're excited about that then this is the place for you. There's not that many people who would be. It was kind of happenstance in a way. We were all the same age, and I don't think in my mind, that there was, especially in those early years, any sort of big organising principle or any vision of anything. It was just like here's these people and we're here so let's just do it. I think it did change over the years because we all changed, and we all got older and the work we were doing matured. I think that ultimately, that's what Forest Fringe was, and continues to be, is a community of artists whose works have developed in parallel alongside each other. So necessarily, the shape that those artists might create to accommodate that work will change and be different. Forest Fringe was never, and I always remember talking with them about it in the latter years when people would apply when they would have more open-call things or would invite people to come and be part of it, you have to explain to people that Forest Fringe is not a service. It's not like the rest of the Fringe, it's not like you can turn up, here's your slot or you pay for your slot, that's not what it is, you're not providing service for people. What you're saying is, this is an invitation to be part of a very specific community that function in this particular way. It won't suit everybody, it won't suit all kinds of work. It might be really annoying for lots of people because of the work they make or the personality that they are, or you know,

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

the time that they have available. But I think it evolved as we all evolved, you know, and then eventually it evolved beyond the Fringe and it just was not interesting or exciting or relevant for any of us, particularly Andy, Debbie and Ira because it was so much work for them to organise Forest Fringe in Edinburgh. It was better and more interesting to do other things. I think ultimately Forest Fringe ran on a budget of about £5 and no one got paid and it wasn't ever trying to be anything other than that. I think it was right that it ended when it did and the baton is passed on to the next generation of artists who might do things in a completely different way, and probably are. There's probably loads of stuff going on in Edinburgh and elsewhere that I have no idea about because I'm too old and uncool for it now, do you know what I mean? There'll be the new thing and I just don't know what it is, but that's how it should be. I think it would be weird if you know, me as a twenty-five year old back then was in my twenties getting all involved and now me as a forty-year-old to be doing the same thing would be like get out, it's time for the younger generations to build their own thing. They don't they want me hanging around, it would be weird. [Laughs] I think these things have a natural life cycle and I think that's fine and good, actually.

SG: Yes. It's making me think of where you were describing that experience of Forest Fringe and also how it changed over time, that the experience of then, in 2017 doing the British Council Showcase. That would've been *Slap Talk*, I think?

GP: Yes.

SG: Was the venue called CodeBase, somewhere up near the Hub?

GP: Yes.

SG: It would've been quite a different kind of relationship going back into a venue where maybe it did have exactly those same kinds of service relationships that you described before. You know, where you are paying for space and that you are maybe at the Festival with a very specific intention. Well, with the British Council Showcase, you're presenting your work in the hope that a really broad range of promoters are going to see it, so quite a different set of circumstances.

GP: Yes, totally. It's completely different, it's a totally different gig, a totally different deal. I think it's just really different and we went into it with a completely different set of expectations. But also, by that point, we're seven or ten years on from the first time that we ever went to Edinburgh. And all of that stuff of, you know, people seeing your work and it getting programmed because it was on in Edinburgh, in the first few years that was

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

happening but I just didn't know that that's what was going on. I'd had no idea. I wasn't very switched on to that stuff, I had no idea how it worked, how it operated. When we were invited to perform in the British Council Showcase in 2009, which we performed *A Western*, finished, at Forest Fringe. It was the first time that Forest Fringe had ever done something in the British Council Showcase. I think there were other artists, maybe not, maybe we were the only ones. I don't know but I remember when we got invited to be in the British Council Showcase in 2009 it was like a thing, it was like oh Action Hero, because we'd only been making work together since 2005 and even then, not really. I was still a temp, even at the time, James was delivering sandwiches, and being invited to be in the British Council Showcase but in the context of Forest Fringe which we'd done for the last couple of years. Maybe it was 2007 the first time we went, I can't remember. Anyway, suddenly it was like this very big thing of international showcasing against this very small DIY thing. Then you realise, oh, the reason we got invited – that was when you couldn't apply to the British Council Showcase, you got invited to participate – realising at that time that these people must have seen my work. I had no idea when that happened, I didn't invite them. They're like a mystery cabal of programmers who go around scouting for international work, or work that would suit an international context. We were just very fortunate that our work fitted the bill. I had no idea about what that would mean. At that point it's like Forest Fringe has become something that's exciting, sexy, desirable to people outside of the scene that we are operating in. Before that, it had been completely, and Andy, Debbie and Ira might say something different, but from my perspective, completely internal. It was completely inward looking, we were just doing stuff together for ourselves, for the community, for our community. We were doing it all for free, doing stuff because it was funny or fun or whatever, and then you realise, oh, maybe people think is good and interesting or cool or whatever. Then there's like a little sort of golden period of a few years where you can keep on doing the same thing and inviting outside people into it. But then, necessarily, your work changes. What Forest Fringe can do, and has capacity to do, that changes, and more things become possible. Then you want to do those possible things, because you don't want it to stay the same. I think there are younger artists coming through who perhaps wanted Forest Fringe to serve that same function for them, but it can't because it's kind of up to those artists to build their own thing to facilitate their own work. That's just the nature of what that that stuff was. I think I didn't really realise until much later that going to Edinburgh was

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

a really important thing for us from a career perspective, from that professional side as well. Artistically, I always knew it was important. But from a kind of career perspective, because I think we never went in with that expectation, you know I never went up to Edinburgh and did a show in order to book a tour. We'd already done a national tour before. It was a small one, but we'd already done a UK tour before we'd taken a finished show to Edinburgh. We did it the other way round. The work that we were making was never going to be programmed, we were never going to get a slot at C venues. There's just nothing about what we do that fits that. I think it's a funny thing, in terms of visibility, it gave us loads of visibility but in a way that was not that was not by design, it was just by a set of circumstances. A particular community of people and artists and that sort of came together and together, that created some sort of thing that was attractive to other people.

SG: It's sort of interesting to me. I think the British Council, from maybe a few years before you performed or the first time you were involved with them for that showcase, have quite consciously used live art as part of their curatorial frame.

GP: Yes.

SG: So, stuff gets tagged or labelled as live art as well as performance. So maybe this is the point of shifting into that part of that conversation about the usefulness, or not, of life as a frame. Maybe the way to do it actually though, because I realise, I want to talk to about some of your work in a little bit more detail, is knowing that you've made work for a lot of different contexts or at least working with a number of different forms and so that there is a kind of trilogy, or the informal trilogy, of *A Western*, *Watch Me Fall* and *Front Man*. It's a trilogy in my head anyway.

GP: It is for us too. [Laughs]

SG: Then there's also things like *Slap Talk*, which, as we've said is a live performance, but it's also I suppose, a performance to camera. But then there's things like *Radio Europa* and the installation piece *From Ashes*, which I know was kind of a one-off project. So, what's the question I'm asking. I suppose, maybe it's to ask a little bit about yours and James's interest in working across those different forms and where that sits next to live art when it comes to making your practice, I guess, intelligible to yourself as well as quite pragmatically to programmers or to festivals.

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

GP: Yes. I have a lot of thoughts about this. I mean, one of the things that I think, just to briefly reference British Council Showcase, and also National Review of Live Art – we were in National Review of Live Art in 2007, I think.

SG: What was like?

GP: Oh, it was horrible, horrible. [Laughs]

SG: What was rough about it?

GP: It was a horrible place to perform. It's a great place if you want to go, I wish I'd just gone as a punter. We performed in it once and it was a horrible experience just because of the set-up of it though. They would programme shows back to back so people would leave your show halfway through to go and queue for the next one so that they get in. Then people would walk out of shows 'cause they wanted to see another one. It's a horrible situation to perform in, but I saw loads of amazing work. I saw an incredible Guillermo Gómez-Peña show there that was completely extraordinary. It was exciting just because of scale and type of work and also having a sense of, "oh, I think these are all people that I need to meet, to talk to." You know, it's useful in that term, in that sense. But I think from a British Council perspective, from the Edinburgh showcase, I didn't realise until much, much later, maybe only a couple of years ago, when you are invited to participate in the showcase, which we have been four times which is really, really fortunate to have had that opportunity and I've got a lot of work from it and a lot of relationships over time, but I've only sort of realised quite recently that it is set up to try and sell your work, but that's not the only thing it's selling, obviously. It's also selling an idea of Britain and so sometimes your work might be programmed not because they actually think that your particular show will get some actual gigs for you, it's one part of a broader package. It's like cultural export. I mean, that's so obvious. I mean they say that that's what they are, they don't pretend. But yes, I think that's kind of one of the reasons why it's politically or strategically useful for British Council to position its live art as part of its cell is because it's about innovation in the UK. On that bigger picture level, they want people to invest in a country that's progressive, forward-thinking, experimental and on the cutting edge or the avant-garde of new things. So, they put your weird little show on and it's indicative of a bigger cultural message that the UK wants to sell about itself. I think I didn't realise that for quite a long time, that just because I'm in the British Council Showcase, I might not be in there because the British Council thinks that this particular show is going to get those gigs. I might be in there because

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

I'm part of the pantheon of what it's trying to export. I didn't realise that for quite a long time.

SG: But that must be quite a tricky situation to then find yourself in. Maybe it's better that you've realised it in retrospect. They clearly think my work has value, because they wouldn't just programme anything, but at the same time you know you've been included for a strategic reason as well.

GP: Yes. I think it's also just sort of recognising that the more experience you have with international touring, and we've been touring work internationally for about twelve years, you realise the different reasons why you might get programmed into a certain situation. And there's a million different reasons as to why that might be. It's not always to do with a simple thing of, I like your show so I'm going to buy it. There are a lot of different reasons to do with funding and much bigger, strategic relationships between countries at a national level. I don't find it depressing or difficult.

SG: That's the reality of it.

GP: That's what that is, okay. I knew that the reason that you would be sent somewhere with British Council money is to do with cultural diplomacy. There are some artists who I've spoken to who don't want to be involved in that, which is totally fine. For me it's not a problem. I guess there is something about the term 'live art', what it represents, how you sit within it as an artist, whether it is useful or not, how it might be useful for something that is bigger than you, and whether that value comes back to you or not as a maker. I have to say, I don't often find the term helpful. I think in the UK it means something. In other countries it doesn't mean anything. I think it wants to be helpful as a term and I think it was early on, for being a different space that could catch all of the other stuff that was emphatically not theatre, or emphatically not music, or emphatically not visual art. The problem with any sort of category is that, if you make a new category for all of the things that don't fit into the other categories, then the category becomes hardened and there are things that are not allowed to be called live art because they're not live arty enough. It just becomes its own category. Sometimes I wonder about how useful it is. Perhaps it would just be more helpful if we all could just accept a broad interpretation of what performance might be, or a broad interpretation of what theatre might be, or dance or art. Rather than having to tie things down to a certain label. Something can be live art, but it can also not be live art and I think that can be restrictive sometimes. There is a desperate need to name it, let's name this

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

thing and then it exists. I also understand that from a funding perspective or a strategic, art-form, bigger picture perspective, the same as the British Council saying, here's live art so that they can sell a specific idea of the UK. By naming this thing as an art form, then you can attract investment, you can attract funding, you can attract curatorial prestige, or you can position it. I can see how that's useful.

SG: There's also a little bit of, does it happen because you name it live art, or does it just happen, and you call it live art retrospectively. It potentially brings together communities of artists who are interested in the same kind of work or the same kind of possibilities.

GP: Yes, potentially. Yes, I think it does. I think, at its best, it provides an umbrella under which a broad spectrum of practice can sit and be in dialogue and I think that's really useful, particularly in this country where we have a writer's theatre. There's a heaviness about that which maybe doesn't happen in other countries, or people aren't so concerned.

SG: I read that *Wrecking Ball* is the only Action Hero play, in inverted commas, but it also feels like a work which is really quite consciously playing with the set-up of what theatre is, or that thread is there. A thread which, for me, runs through lots of your work that is about a game with liveness.

GP: Yes, right. I think we probably could've positioned *Wrecking Ball* as a piece of live art, but I think we decided to position it as a play. I don't know why, I think there are lots of reasons why, some of them are probably artistic, some of them are probably a bit more mercenary so we could get more bookings because we need to make money. I think James and I have made work that sits across a lot of different art forms for a long time. I think that just feels very natural and instinctive for us. I'm interested in finding the form that fits the content and not feeling restricted by that. That's really exciting to me. We don't describe our work as live art any more. It's not in our biography, nor is theatre.

SG: So, is it performance or cross-artform? What's the language?

GP: We change it all the time, but I think the most recent one is that we share an interdisciplinary performance practice together under the name Action Hero. I think we say that we create artworks that span multiple disciplines, including performance, installation, sound work, digital practice, work for public space. I think we have sometimes felt that our work isn't really at home in live art, because it isn't really live arty enough to be live art. Some of our work is. I suppose because the Live Art Development Agency, for example, we

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

have had no engagement with at any point during our practice. They are the self-named development agency for this art form, and we seem to not be in their stable.

SG: So, what does that say about them, what does that say about your work?

GP: Yes, but it's also fine. Lois coined the term and then she set up an organisation to support the art form, which I massively respect, but then it's her vision, it's her organisation, her curatorial guide, it's her bag and we're not really in it and that's okay. There are loads of artists who they support whose work I love, love love love, who they have supported over time. Lots of artworks which for me feel to be seminal works, which have been really inspirational to me. Loads of the stuff they do, I think is really brilliant and really important. For whatever reason, we've always been sort of at the very most, on the peripheries of Live Art Development Agency.

SG: Okay. One of the other things, maybe the last thing, that I wanted to ask you was maybe about your sense of that sort of wider ecology or landscape. Though this project is focused on Scotland, just from this conversation we have a sense that different organisations or possibilities of touring are all feeding into each other, whether it's through formal collaborations between spaces, or whether it's because of friendships, or people like Andy being at The BAC and then moving onto other projects. I'm interested in your sense of that ecology, for want of a better term. We've been talking about the Fringe a lot, the space of the Fringe and the Forest Fringe and your encounter with The Arches. Did you present work at The Arches outside of a National Review of Live Art? I think I've got a note somewhere that you did.

GP: Yes, we did. So, when we performed at National Review of Live Art it was at Tramway.

SG: Okay, yes.

GP: We presented at The Arches outside of NRLA and also in one of their club nights. So just that and then at Buzzcut as well we've done stuff there before.

SG: Yes, so that was also on my sort of list of things that I knew you been. Where I think I'd seen you in Scotland was at Buzzcut. But it's interesting to me, well when you were talking about like the cycles or generations of artists making things and then those things having a natural life to them. Obviously Buzzcut is maybe one of those things, like Forest Fringe, that came out of a particular group of artists but there's clearly overlap between generations of artists there. So maybe through my interest in your sense of the broader ecology, what was Buzzcut like for you? [Laughs]

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

GP: It was great, I loved it. We went to Buzzcut Form maybe only once actually. I think we applied once and didn't get in. I think we'd been up to just to see work, but I think I went because I knew Rosana and Nick just from around and then later on, Karl. I think I first met Carl when he was a student. I remember thinking that this is kind of what Forest Fringe was like in the early days, so I wanted to go to support them as an older, not-emerging artist who was sort of on the scene. I wanted to go and see the work. I wanted to go because I knew it was being self-organised and that's exciting to me, and I love it when people just do things like that, and I want to go and be part of it because it's really fun. I liked it for the atmosphere and the you know, the fact that they just decided to organise this thing themselves. I also wanted to go to it to be supportive and to say, I'll come up all the way from Bristol to see this work. When we wanted to perform there, I knew this would be a really fun place to perform, to do a piece of a show there. That that would be a cool thing to do. In the same way that when we used to go and do stuff at Forest Fringe in the later on days, it was partly for yourself because that would be a fun way to show your work. Later on, you realise that people are going to see it there, I didn't realise that early on. There's no money ever because it's all artist-led and self-organised, but it's also a nice way to be able to gift work back to your community, without that sounding too grandiose. That's a nice thing, I like doing that kind of thing. We're part of a few different groups in Bristol. There are artists who have been making work for longer. I think that's kind of like a responsibility that you have. And it's a nice thing to do. I always think of an artist like say, Tim Etchells who has always been super supportive of Forest Fringe even in the early days. Either showing work there or he had those neon signs that he let them put up or did poster campaigns and stuff like that. I think it's a nice thing to be able to do as a really well established senior artist, to be able to do something for a group of emerging artists. It lends a bit of visibility to it and a bit of weight. It's just a really nice thing to be able to do. I think in terms of the broader ecology of live art practice in the UK, it changes all the time. James wrote something recently about all the places that we have toured to in the UK and how many of them have gone now. There is a sadness around that, particularly when it's more impactful to the scene as a whole when, say the Greenroom in Manchester, when that closes that's a big thing and that does have more impact than Forest Fringe stopping in Edinburgh because that was voluntary then just kind of popped up every now and again and something else will

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

take its place. I do think that these things do have a natural cycle and things influence the stuff that becomes before and the stuff that comes after. One of the problems with the UK scene is that it's really inward looking. We kind of have this category now of live art which was supposed to be a non-category, but it is now just a category in and of itself. It can get tricky I think, as the work tries to look outwards to the rest of Europe or the world in terms of being in dialogue with work that's happening and being created in other countries and other sort of artistic scenes. Of course, everywhere has its own language around what the work is, or how to describe what has been made. I think it's a peculiarity of the UK scene that it's a pretty inward looking scene so sometimes that means that there are frames of reference which only make sense here, they don't make sense outside of the UK.

Sometimes that's to do with terminology, but sometimes it to do with reference points and what it might mean if you say piece of work is theatre? What is it that you might expect to see? Or if a piece of work is dance what you might expect to see on the stage, or not on the stage. I think that sometimes the desire to have live art as a sort of term, or practice, or cultural strategy, silly phrases, and maybe it's just a natural thing that happens overtime, but the desire to expand can end up hemming itself in, tying itself up in knots. I think there's a natural turnover, I suppose, of artists and venues and festivals and artist-led stuff and terminology and all of that, and the kind of complex interrelationship with, or the interplay of, all of those things I think is super interesting. You can see how they all influence each other and a lot of the work that it is in the mainstream now, you can track it back. You would be able to track it back to the work that we were all involved with in early Forest Fringe days. Summerhall wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for Forest Fringe. I'm sure that there'll be knock-on effects in another ten years. I'm sure that probably Forest Fringe wouldn't have been there if something else that I don't know about hadn't happened in the 90s or the 80s. And sometimes those places disappear when the work spreads out into the mainstream. I guess you might be able to argue that some of the stuff that might be on at Traverse now wouldn't have been on there fifteen years ago. Perhaps the space of that fringe of the Fringe stuff does move into the mainstream. There are pros and cons to that obviously, but I suppose there is a flow of that work and the space it occupies.

SG: Yes. That's great. It's so interesting, I asked Andy about where he was seeing work, or where was important to him at the Festival before Forest Fringe, and we talked about Aurora Nova.

Live Art in Scotland: Gemma Paintin

GP: Oh yes.

SG: Because of all the physical and visual theatre, actually. That's the frame that's used there, 'visual theatre' or 'dance theatre' that was being brought across.

GP: It's super interesting. I think terminology is a funny thing. I think it's really funny thing. A couple of years ago, we went to New York in January. There's that little cluster of festivals in January: Under The Radar, Coil at P.S. 122, there's a contemporary opera festival, American Realness dance festival, so you went for a week to see loads of work. It was a total mixed bag. Some brilliant, some terrible. But we saw loads and loads of stuff and some of it was pretty traditional, some of it was super super experimental. I don't think anybody used the words 'live art' once. It was all kind of described as theatre or dance. I guess there was just a different set of expectations about what that might mean. Not that it's better or worse, I don't mean that. It's kind of interesting that in the theatre or performance scene in the UK, we've had to invent another word for us to be able to like do something that it isn't a modern restaging of *Coriolanus* or something like that. I wonder if it's a particular UK problem but I don't know. I mean, I obviously know a lot more about the UK scene than I do about the scene in other countries, where you just come in or I do anyway, as a visitor and watch stuff, present work and then it's always easier to say, "Imagine if we lived here", or "Imagine if we made our work here, then everything would be so much easier." [Laughs] Then you wouldn't have all these art form restrictions. I'm sure that that's a false perception of what it's like, but I think it's interesting.