

Live Art in Scotland: FK Alexander

This interview was conducted online via Zoom on 23rd March 2021 as part of the Live Art in Scotland research project at the University of Glasgow.

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Stephen Greer (SG): Maybe we can just start off by talking about your early experiences or encounters with performance art or live art? Or what you would now view as performance art or live art?

FK Alexander (FKA): My interests were only ever about films, music, art, books. It was always about culture; I didn't really have any other interests. In the nineties things like *The Face* magazine were doing pretty out-there photography. *Bizarre* magazine wrote a lot about different out-there artists. I was at my gran's house and there were probably five channels or whatever and I was flicking through while nicking her fags and her booze and I saw a documentary which I now believe to be *The South Bank Show* that had Bob Flanagan, Franko B and Ron Athey in it. What they were doing to their bodies and what I was doing to my body was very similar, but they were artists and I was crazy and that was probably the first moment that I was like oh, so could there be a way to do this. For me a lot of art is things that you'd be arrested for if you did them in the street but if you do them in this space, you're a genius, which I think is hilarious. Because I'd seen Franko B on that tv show and I'd started going out with somebody who lived here, I was coming through to Glasgow and I saw a flyer for NRLA in 2001, I think. Franko B was the picture on the front and I said to my boyfriend we should go and see this person. We went up to the arches and we went to the place and they were like oh, it's this, it's a festival and it's a one-to-one and it's booked

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out. I hadn't been in a place before where I had to book a one-to-one experience with an artist. We didn't get in because it was sold out so we went the Solid Rock Cafe and got tattoos and got engaged.

SG: [Laughs].

FKA: After that it was moving to Glasgow and pursuing the stuff that I was already interested in in terms of music, but then being like if I like the stuff I'm going to now and I tried to get into that Arches place, maybe there are other things there.

SG: Were you going back to the Arches? Did you go back to the National Review of Live Art in following years?

FKA: Yes. Not straight away but more particularly when I started being friends with Sarah-jane Grimshaw who doesn't make work now but made some really amazing pieces when she was graduating. The first time I went to NRLA she was like right, pack a bag, here we go. It was like you're going to spend five days in total darkness underneath a railway, things are going to happen to you, you will not know how to expect them or be able to predict them, but they will happen to you. We may come up for air only to smoke cigarettes or do lines of cocaine. There are no other reasons and we will do this for five days and you will come out a different person and I did.

SG: [Laughs]. I think quite a few of the accounts of being at the NRLA echo that experience of the intensity of it and also the idea that you go and you see anything and everything. You don't necessarily know what it is that you're going to see, there'll be a lot of queueing and waiting around but it's a total immersion.

FKA: Yes. There wasn't really a lot of queueing and waiting around, it felt very fluid. It felt that at some point somebody would tap you on the arm and say, get up now because we have to go into this room. It was totally maximalist. Even if you read the programme, what was that telling you, nothing. You learn later that this person had to write that six months ago and they have been on a process during that time unless it's an established piece. To my understanding, most people were making versions of something that they did, or it was a completely new piece, or they were transferring something that they did and then they were being in these spaces and it was like what does this space tell me about what I can do with this work. I think I was as enamoured with the space and the experience of going as I

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was by a lot of work. There is work that I remember and it wasn't particularly because I was blown away by the work but the feeling in the room, which was very tangible. It was exciting. We were really high but you can be high and stare at a wall. Everything was heightened, which was cool. That way of watching work has gone out of fashion for totally understandable reasons, but it's interesting. The idea that there would be a quiet space or there'd be breaks between pieces for people to do whatever and not be in a room, or having trigger warnings on the doors, none of that was around at all. That feeling of I'm walking into a room and what happens next is out my control was really thrilling. I can understand why people wouldn't want to see things in that way. I've not seen a space like that for a while.

SG: It's interesting that festival model. It feels now that so many festivals are set up where you are making active choices about what to see or not in a way that the NRLA didn't particularly invite or allow.

FKA: I'm sure there was all sorts of rationale behind the programming. If you think about the way that music festivals were programmed, they were never set out that you could see everything. If you went to a festival, you had to write out your schedule and allow for the time to get from one stage to another. It was always about the speed of it all, but at a music festival you probably know the bands that you want to see, whereas at NRLA it was like I don't know who this person is, and you go in. Also, bands generally play instruments, whereas with art you can go into the same room five times in one day and it's a different world if you're lucky.

SG: Maybe talking about that comparison between music festivals and the NRLA is a convenient rhetorical slide in to talking about the status of music and collaboration with musicians in your work. I'm thinking about the broader landscape of live art in Scotland and about work that gets characterised as sonic art or in the space between sonic and visual art, in which some of your work or maybe a lot of your work could maybe be positioned. The question here is about some of the collaborations and the ongoing collaborations you've had with musicians and particularly people like Lea Cummings and Sarah Glass. How did those relationships come about, how did you start working together with those and other folk?

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FKA: When I first moved through to Glasgow Lea was doing Kylie Minoise a lot. I think it's been a wee while since he's performed live now, but at that time it was noise music, experimental music which was my favourite scene when I left Edinburgh. All the music scenes were my kind of scene but that one in particular was probably the longest. When I came through to Glasgow, I wanted to find that type of style and I worked in a venue where people did shows at the time. Lea was one of the people that I saw all of the time or was playing while I was doing the bar or going to the shows. There were funny moments of me going that was really cool and him going yes, thank you, goodbye. Then he started going out with Sarah and that's been twelve years now.

SG: Can you remember what the first thing that you worked on with them was?

FKA: Yes, they made a piece called *All Time Is Happening Now* for a festival in The Whisky Bond. I can't remember who programmed it, but it was a big range of art school stuff. It was a Friday night and the floor that we were on was about to be renovated so they said to the curators you can do whatever you want. You can throw things at the wall, you can throw shit around, you can do whatever you want. I didn't know that at the time. Lee and Sarah came to me one day and said we'd like you to be in this five-hour durational performance that we're doing. Not long before that I had done a durational piece for Sound Thought in the Arches where I was in the basement, and I think I sang nine albums non-stop. I'd done that quite quietly, but I think a few people particularly within music stuff were like oh LK's done that. But yes, Lea and Sarah just said do you want to be in this, all you have to do is this for this amount of time. There were logistic questions such as is this the right top, aesthetic choices and making sure that I knew exactly what they wanted me to do, but I didn't ask why have you asked me. I completely trusted them. That was one of my favourite things I've ever done. At the end, we completely trashed everything that we had been using and we were painting all over the walls anyway and making this horrible altar that everyone spat bread onto, and it was full of medications, broken electronics, and paint. It was the coolest. That was a good process. Then, when I was making *I Could Go On Singing* again, they were together on Okishima Island Tourist Association and I just said, I'm going to do something over here and you guys just play a set. Again, they didn't ask what I was doing, why I was doing it, they were just like yes, cool. It felt very natural after that to get each

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other to do different things. We collaborated in different combinations on different projects.

SG: What do you think is the basis of that relationship? Is it one that's sheer trust because you are friends, or is it also to do with knowing that there is a similar aesthetic that you're all invested in such as noise music in different ways, or is there something else in that invitation? It strikes me that it could be quite a radical act of trust as well as a high demand of someone to say I'm going to do this, I would like you to do that, and then leave that as an open offer.

FKA: Totally. I think a lot of it for me anyway, and I'm guessing for them too, is if you see somebody put in the hours at specific types of shows or you see a certain level of commitment, whether that's supporting people that are doing that or doing stuff yourself, then it's for a relatively small audience. If you consistently turn out and if some of your favourite things are the same are maybe a bit more niche. It's like if you enjoyed these then you may also enjoy this. I think a lot of it was aesthetics. I suppose small things to big things. I think if you have a good working relationship with somebody straight away, it can be quite straightforward to maintain that. I don't remember a thing where any of us have said are you okay to do this and somebody has said no, that's rubbish. Obviously, it's where you cross over and where you don't cross over is okay too.

SG: So, you have a fairly intuitive sense almost of when the thing that you want to work on will include them or won't.

FKA: Yes. I think all three of us are good at standing still on a stage.

SG: [Laughs].

FKA: Doing Judy as much as we have it's like there is no communication, well there is communication between us during the show but ultimately, there is also not. We go in and then we come out of the tunnel at the end.

SG: Am I right in saying that that particular show, *I Could Go On Singing*, is the one that's been restaged and toured the most out of all of your works and it's appeared multiple times in Glasgow and then at the festival in Edinburgh during the Made in Scotland Showcase and it's also toured lots of places in the UK and the states as well?

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FKA: Yes, and various parts of Europe.

SG: Do you have a sense when you have taken that work outside of Scotland of there being a different set of opportunities for live art or a different ecology, or does it just feel like Scotland but at a different scale? Maybe there is a more specific question to ask there, was it Fusebox that you went to in Austin?

FKA: Yes.

SG: What was that like as a festival in comparison to staging the work at the Fringe for example?

FKA: When I think of Fusebox, part of what I think of immediately is the space because they used so many different places in Austin. Even though Austin isn't as big as you'd think, you still need car rides to these places and it's not close together. Yet when you went to spaces at particular times to see particular things, you could see big crowds, again depending on whether it was ticketed or if it was in a hanger compared to a studio. It was just expansive. I'm pretty sure you could see everything that you wanted to see. Part of why I was there was to experience the festival. I think when you're travelling over Europe and in the UK, depending on how long the festival is you might come to a festival and not see anybody else's work because you come in the night before and you do your show. It's not a long enough travel day that you need the next day, you can just fly in one day, do the show the next day and leave the day after. I find that quite stressful, but it's also a bit more of a band aid. Sometimes you're at a festival and you don't really know what the festival was like at all and that's fine.

SG: When you were appearing at the festival, your work was at Summerhall. I'm conscious that with live art or experimental performance or performance art, the spaces that it turns up in during the Fringe seem to be quite few in number. There are almost a series of venues which acknowledge there needs to be a special set of circumstances which will enable both the audiences and the artists to feel welcome for that kind of work. Does that reflect your experience? Was there something about Summerhall that felt like the right fit for that show?

FKA: Absolutely, there was. Edinburgh was getting bigger and bigger and more places were calling themselves venues and that's a different debate, but it didn't make sense to me to

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be in any other space. I didn't really entertain any other spaces. That sounds really like I wouldn't have gone anywhere else, but I think you go for the thing you want first. Again, being able to get a raw concrete space, even though our room was really small it was still possible. Lights, really loud music and intimidating frowns, you can do a lot with that. Even though the space wasn't big we were still able to make it like, you have entered.

SG: From my experience of seeing a show in that downstairs space, because it was quite an intimate space that did heighten the gestures. There's obviously the cross on the floor where audience members step forward to be with you, to sing with you, to be sung at or all of the above, and it obviously wasn't a great distance to the middle of the room. Maybe because it was so close, it seemed to heighten the stakes of the gesture that you were only taking two or three steps forward.

FKA: I think what is quite cool about that piece is that wherever it is, it has to fit in to the space that it's in and a lot of the minutiae of it has the ability to be reread depending on the space. I think the range of reactions was reflective of the range of spaces that we've been in even though there are things that are continuous. When we first did it in the Arches, you had to really walk and it meant that me and the person could exclude the crowd and it did become very intimate, whereas in Summerhall it was heightened because even though I'm in constant contact with the person in front of me, I do have peripheral and supernatural abilities to be conscious of where everybody is and what everybody is doing at all times. It felt as if somebody could just punch me in the face. People are drinking all day, they get offended, and they don't like you, which is fascinating. The amazing thing about that particular space at Summerhall was that nobody else wanted it so we put a padlock on the door and it was just my room in the middle of Edinburgh. I could go there two hours before showtime, I was spending half an hour on lashes. I can't really imagine having to get out and get in every day under time pressure. Hats off to people who did that. It was cushty to have an exclusive space, but it was because nobody else wanted it [laughs].

SG: That's interesting. That's quite a neat story about where live art sits in relationship to institutions. It claims the space that no one else wants. That's me bringing my own narrative to it.

FKA: It's totally true. It felt like the right time to bring that starker piece of work to Edinburgh. It was like fuck it, let's go and it turned out to be a good time. I also knew that

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because I'm from there and because I live here there were personal stakes, but I didn't have the financial stakes. The money people spend. I didn't have to find accommodation.

SG: Given those stakes, do you think you will take work back to the Edinburgh Fringe in the future, or is it impossible to say. Will it depend on the project?

FKA: This time last year myself and the team at Something To Aim For and Sick of The Fringe and Summerhall had a project that was going to be happening that summer. We would've been in the music programming for Summerhall and we would have been doing it at the beginning of the month and then I was going to do some more research during that time. The year before, I was on the Total Theatre Awards panel so we saw five shows a day and doing the awards and that gave me that feeling of baddabing baddabing, get my therapist on the phone, I've got to go, taxi, bagel! It gave me that sorry I've got to go, I'm on the awards panel. It gave me that rush again. Is it hard work, did I have an absolute breakdown in the middle of it? Yes, of course, but it was very exciting.

SG: Maybe that links to the last sort of thing that I was interested in asking you about. I've been trying to find the right words to talk about people's sense of their peers, their collaborators, their co-conspirators, the people who came up with them or alongside them. In that role as a judge or a reviewer looking at other people's work that obviously changes that relationship, but do you have a sense of there being a live art community in Scotland? Do you look across the horizon and see other people's work who are fellow travellers?

FKA: I think there was a bit more a few years ago. I think that more people are doing are their own thing. All the time it's getting much harder to collaborate. For a bit, if you went up and down the UK to certain festivals you would see a core group of the same people, but it wouldn't necessarily be reflective of the work. It was more reflective of who was at this festival this year and then you see them again six months later. I think that gets into a more social conversation about friends versus your practice having something in common.

SG: Maybe it's a difficult thing to talk about a year into the pandemic where so many of those networks have dissipated or completely changed. What I'm interested in is the overlap between professional relationships and friendships and social circles just because the ways in which festivals and other events, scratch notes, and gigs get put together involve a complicated mix of both the personal and the profession.

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FKA: Yes. It's totally complicated. I think at BUZZCUT in particular I definitely heard other people say that they thought it was cliquey. I had conversations with some people that were like yes, I can see why somebody might think that, but the reality is that we're genuinely friends so we're not going to not do things because we've formed close friendships.

Somebody like Phoebe Patey-Ferguson who I met at a festival, we spoke about work, and over time we've become good friends. They're not somebody who makes their own work, they are an academic and most of their stuff is more academically based. If you're an artist and you're making work and you're making it from the middle of your body and you put that in front of people and somebody wants to talk to you about it, it's personal. It's not the same as somebody at the Fringe coming up to you after a show and saying that was brilliant and you say thank you, but you don't see them again. If you're having these personal conversations and you're also on a seven-hour train ride. Getting out of Latitude is intense. There was one Monday at Latitude where it took me and Karl Taylor twelve hours to get home in a heatwave. I remember turning round to Karl and saying listen, you're going to see a side of me today and there is nothing I can do about it, just do not hold me to this because I'm going to be a fucking cunt because I am very tired.

SG: [Laughs].

FKA: Latitude was a bit more like a busman's holiday. It was a really lovely time. Katy Baird or somebody would be like right, I'm going to programme fifteen people for two days and everyone gets one hundred pounds and a free holiday, and you do a bit of weird art and then everyone has fun. But also, after camping for five days, by Monday morning it's like I don't want to talk about that anymore.

SG: [Laughs].

FKA: Take me home. If you are sleeping, eating, seeing intense stuff and talking about, hanging out, and seeing each other again and again, you're not going to be close friends with everybody but of course it feels like there's a community. Of course it does.