

Live Art in Scotland: Clarinda Tse

This interview was conducted online via Zoom on 16th April 2021 as part of the Live Art in Scotland research project at the University of Glasgow.

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Stephen Greer (SG): A little bit of my interest [in your work] is why you choose to work with performance sometimes, or why performance or live performance is part of your practice?

Clarinda Tse (CT): That's quite a surprising shift for me too. I think making art or doing stuff like that is a process of understanding my perception of the world. I moved into performing objects or performing bodies because human bodies are amazing, just looking at the flexibility and the dynamic life that's in human bodies. There may be an element of magic within human bodies in performance even though it has been viewed as bodies performing within performance for a long time. I don't know if that makes sense.

SG: I like the idea that [with] bodies or performing bodies there's an extraordinary or extra-daily quality to them. I like the idea that they are magical. So, is your primary background as a fine artist? Is it in sculpture? Is that where you would say that you are coming from artistically?

CT: Yes, I come from an object-based, sculptural background. I'm always interested in organising a chaotic situation. My previous installations have been a spread of found objects and I really enjoy the interaction of movement with a chaotic situation. I guess that's why choreography is interesting for me because there is a time element coming into arrangements or compositions of objects or bodies.

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SG: Is that something that has grown out of working with Colette Sadler, or is that something that you were already moving towards before that particular collaboration started?

CT: There were a few attempts of making performances previously, but I think the idea of choreography was brought to the forefront with a chat with Colette. I don't see myself as a dancer, I'm untrained. I feel like choreography is this specific language that deals with dance, but through that conversation I realised that it really frames this time element that I'm interested in within compositions, so I started to think more towards choreography in my performances.

SG: It's that dynamic of time which is the route in. One of the things that is really striking to me from looking at images of your work is the tactile quality of the materials you are working with. I don't know if you could speak a little bit about that choice, or how that sets up a relationship between you as a performer and the objects you're working with. It feels like the touch or the sensation of the objects are really important.

CT: Yes. The tactility relates to touch and that's really important in my work. That kind of direct sensation that you have, or that I have with a shared audience to be able to touch the things, which is interesting in relation to the idea that traditionally sculptures or things on display in museums are not to be touched. I think that direct sense of touch is so magical. The desire to touch something that is interesting to your hands. It maybe links a lot to cooking because you touch a lot of things in cooking and that process can be translated in performances as well.

SG: When I think about cooking, I don't just think about touch, I think about all those other sensations of taste and smell. I'm looking at photographs and those registers are less strongly invoked for me, but is that part of the language of your work as well?

CT: Yes, in cooking materials like the shape and form of noodles. I'm inspired by things that are made to be eaten, but I like to take them out of context. I'm currently looking at making a tofu skin inspired costume. That sense of slight transparency within the materiality of tofu skin and the shapes and forms that are used within cooking are really interesting to me. I'd like to translate those textures or shapes in cooking to thinking about performances as objects.

SG: Lovely. With using food that way, there's a sense of it being quite ordinary and everyday, but also quite uncanny and maybe it's to do with encountering it in a new set of circumstances. Something that I've been exploring when I've been talking to artists on this project has been about their sense of their influences, and if there are people who they feel like they are travelling with. Not just people who came before them, but people who are alongside them. I don't know if you have a sense of whose work shapes or speaks to yours. When you are thinking about your own practice, are there other artists who you are looking at from side to side and seeing their work and either being inspired by it or realising that what you are doing is quite different?

CT: Yes, it's so interesting when you talk about people I'm travelling with. The travelling with is on the same kind of time dimension, you know you're existing with these people. When you mentioned that, I thought of how my working process is quite like foraging, being on this journey and finding things along the way. I was thinking about if it's travelling with, if it's in the same time dimension, or just constant digging in random places and then things pop up. In terms of people that I see around who are inspiring to me, one of them is Soojin Chang who was in Present Futures as well. I'm really interested in their work. Also, Alberta Whittle. I'm super interested in the way that she constructs her performance. I'm not very good at names [laughs], but in terms of written things, definitely, Donna Haraway, Sara Ahmed. I'm looking at *Queer Phenomenology* and I was finding that really interesting to look at how objects are organised recently.

SG: Sara Ahmed's work has been hugely influential for me, and I think I will always be working with it, I don't think it'll ever be something where I say I understand it and I'm done. I find it really interesting how she talks in *Queer Phenomenology* about objects and orientations and quite literally thinking about the materiality of the table, which is the first image that she uses. Thinking about those influences – and I like the idea of an artistic process which, like foraging, is a process of discovery – when you are creating work, is that how you would describe your process or is there also a more directed thing which is that I have a question that I am focussing specifically on a given dynamic or a given topic?

CT: Yes, I would definitely say it's more towards foraging. My most creative moment is when I'm being covered in a blanket in a very unstimulated form and in my own head. Then I have ideas or thoughts. I'm very inspired by daily life, nature, and mushrooms. When you were

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talking about travelling, those things are some of the things. It's definitely a more intuitive approach even towards making daily plans, it might be thoughts that pop up before I fall asleep.

SG: I'm also curious about the spaces and places in which you are making work or finding support for the kind of work you are interested in. We already mentioned Colette Sadler, who is working with the CCA, and I think I know that you're a committee member at Market Gallery?

CT: Yes, that's right.

SG: Maybe we could talk a little bit about that, that ecology of spaces where there is an interest in an expanded view of visual art where there can be an approach to sculpture, choreography, and performance which is very open. Maybe this is a little bit of a conversation about where you have performed or presented work, but do you have a sense of there being opportunities for that in Scotland and in Glasgow in particular?

CT: I think so. I've been a member of The Work Room for around two years and I'm really amazed and impressed by how supportive they are as an organisation of people making performances and anything related to movement or dance. I definitely feel a lot of support from them. I think as an artist, feeling any kind of support is a precious feeling. I do feel there is a huge support network around me in Scotland.

SG: I've spoken to a few different people who work with or have worked with The Work Room, which has been really significant. What's that sense of support, what forms does it take for you? Is it about knowing that there is a physical space there, is it about the community of artists that is attached to it, or there are other dimensions to it?

CT: It is a little bit about visibility, you feel like things you're interested in or the work that you are doing is being seen. With performance as well, other than the documentation which might or might not exist, it is about the moment. It's very different from sculptures which exist continuously so there is a sense of slipperiness or after this moment, it's not there or maybe it has never existed. Having the platforms for your work to be seen, for it to exist in some form, and just being able to chat to people and talk about your work. What we're doing now is really supportive for me.

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SG: Following from that, I'm curious about what impression or experience you have of the wider network of opportunities in Scotland or in the UK. I'm conscious that a lot of the opportunities are dominated by festival models and they bring huge advantages, but they can also be quite problematic, or they offer really specific shapes of opportunities. Things like Glasgow International have been hugely positive, but also offer very specific kinds of opportunities and that's true of all festivals. What's my question [laughs]. So maybe my question is once you move beyond those organisations like The Work Room who offer longer term relationships of support or communities of support, what is your sense of how other institutions fit into that? Do you look round and see festivals or things like Glasgow International or elsewhere in the UK or internationally as part of where your work is going to develop, or where you want your work to develop? I'm partly asking because I know that some artists feel really conflicted about those large-scale festivals; they look great professionally, but they don't necessarily offer community or support.

CT: Yes. It takes a lot of energy and labour to present work. I guess festivals are interesting to bring different works together as a discourse. I don't really know how to answer that question.

SG: Maybe the question isn't relevant to your work [laughs]

CT: I agree with you that sometimes the support network is lacking depending on the festival. It feels like it is a transaction: you submit the work, you do the boring stuff which is the coordination without very much creative exchange, then you show the work and that's it. It also depends on if there is conversation within it with the festival people. Maybe it's about the organisation of the festival and how they make it less of a transaction and more of a generative environment.

SG: I'm conscious that maybe that presence of conversation is what's there in things like Present Futures and maybe events run by organisations like Arika. I don't know if you've gone to Arika's Episodes.

CT: Yes, I really like them.

SG: There's a format there which allows for that generative exchange and is maybe centred on that as much as anything. The other thing that was in my head to talk to you about, and I'm just thinking about how I've encountered your work through its documentation, is that

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relationship between work being made for gallery spaces which is sculptural and some of the live performance we've been talking about. When you present and curate your work, you maybe do separate your work into performance works, pieces of writing, and performing objects. How do you make the decision about the form of your work? Does it seem obvious, and the idea emerges in a particular form that couldn't be any other way?

CT: Do you mean in terms of showing it or in the making of it?

SG: I think both, but maybe in the showing of it when you've decided that you are following through a particular idea. What's involved in the decision about whether it's going to be a live event or whether it's going to be an installation piece without your presence? I'm always interested in the creative impulse and the pragmatic things which are about knowing that I've been invited to work in a particular space and therefore it's going to have this kind of audience and maybe you are working back from those concrete realities as well.

CT: When I think about my work, I do think it's not easy to fit into an exhibition format. I prefer when things are a bit messy. Maybe from the pragmatic side, it's a health and safety thing as well.

SG: [Laughs]

CT: I guess to navigate that I'm planning to make a performance film. I'm experimenting and seeing live art through a camera lens rather than the physical seeing in that moment. I think it's interesting in terms of editing through a lens and from an audience directly seeing it.

SG: I was going to say is that coming out of the work you made for Present Futures which I know was a video work so *Textures Gestures Meshes Measures*.

CT: Thanks for reading it.

SG: I have to keep checking my notes but it's a gorgeous title. Is that part of what has triggered this interest in working with film having done it for that context?

CT: Yes, and that also translates to what I wanted at that point which was connecting with my sister and thinking about Hong Kong. That digital setting is perfect to hold those things. It definitely stemmed from that, maybe I feel a bit more confident about doing a bit of filming. Relating to that, I cut and paste an image of me onto a landscape setting and thought a bit about time travelling in a broad sense. Cutting of footage really intrigues me

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when thinking about the materiality of time, being cut up, being reorganised, collapsing, or expanding. I feel film will be an interesting medium to do that. I don't really think that much about showing work in a certain setting. Perhaps it's more about how people interact with that work.

SG: That's great. Was there anything else about your work or your recent work that you wanted to explore?

CT: Do you want to know a bit more about the work I'm doing?

SG: Yes, if you're working on something at the moment that you'd like to share, that would be great.

CT: You might have seen some images of the work I've done in 2019. It was the slippery, water pocket thing. I think I'm getting into that again.

SG: What's the appeal? Why do you feel like you're getting drawn back to it again?

CT: It's such an interesting material that captures time because the substance is reacting and it gets harder or softer depending how long it's in the solution. I really enjoy that. They're a bit like soft bones. I was thinking about this material with a mushroom that I encountered called a birch polypore. You can peel the skin of that mushroom into a plaster. I'm thinking about the peeling of the skin of this mushroom and trying to peel the skin of this object that doesn't have a skin. I'm rethinking about this material as a time holding device and writing a storyline around a character which is sitting in between a farmer and a monk [laughs]. That's the kind of performance film that I'm working on at the moment.