

ANDREAS WOLFSTEINER/EKATERINA TRACHSEL/
MICHAEL BACHMANN/ANSELM HEINRICH (HG.)

LIVE ART DATA

NEW STRATEGIES IN THEATRE ARCHIVING
NEUE STRATEGIEN DER THEATERARCHIVIERUNG
SCOTLAND // NIEDERSACHSEN

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Neue Strategien der Theaterarchivierung

Scotland // Niedersachsen

unter Mitarbeit von Anne Küper und Frida Stein



2021

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Absent Histories: Working with the Archival Traces of Live Art in Scotland

Stephen Greer

Abstract

Archival materials relating to the histories of live art in Scotland can be found in collections across the UK, with the most substantial resources now located beyond Scotland's borders. Bringing these materials into conversation demands an attentiveness to the centring of existing live art histories on practice in England as well as the particular institutional and infrastructural contexts that have shaped their existence. In considering approaches for recontextualising such archival materials, this article begins to trace a history of absence in which live art in Scotland has been repeatedly marginalised. How might research usefully work with rather than simply seek to correct that dynamic?

Archivmaterialien zur Geschichte der live art in Schottland sind über Sammlungen in ganz Großbritannien verstreut, wobei sich die wichtigsten außerhalb der schottischen Landesgrenzen befinden. Um diese Materialien miteinander ins Gespräch zu bringen, muss zunächst Aufmerksamkeit dafür geschaffen werden, dass Geschichten der (britischen) live art auf England zentriert sind und dass dies im Rahmen bestimmter institutioneller und infrastruktureller Kontexte geschehen ist. Mit der Rekontextualisierung jener Archivmaterialien beginnt Stephen Greer in diesem Beitrag, eine Geschichte der Abwesenheit nachzuzeichnen, in der live art in Schottland immer wieder marginalisiert wurde: Wie kann Forschung sinnvoll mit dieser Dynamik arbeiten, anstelle eines bloßen Korrekturversuchs?

Research which engages with the histories of live art in Scotland must grapple with the distributed and fragmentary nature of its archival traces, scattered across and within collections that are personal, institutional and constitutionally incomplete.¹ Such work unfolds in a context in which live art is a frequently unnamed field of practice whose historical trace is occluded by a popular belief that »something is noticeably lacking in Scottish art: a tradition of performance art«.² In this narrative, performance art features as an innovation imported to Scotland through the ground-breaking programmes of key figures like Richard DeMarco (credited with introducing Tadeusz Kantor, Marina Abramović and Joseph Beuys to Scottish and British audiences in the 1960s and 70s) but without developing roots. It is selectively acknowledged in ways which preserve its marginality through rhetoric which simultaneously affirms and dismisses knowledge of its existence, as in the framing of performance art pioneer Alastair MacLennan by one of Scotland's largest national newspapers as »the most important Scottish artist you've never heard of«.³ These journalistic tropes are paralleled in scholarly histories of Scottish

- 1 On the archival situation also see the contribution by Bachmann/Heinrich in this volume.
- 2 The List. »Still live«. <https://archive.list.co.uk/the-list/1990-09-28/63/>, September 28, 1990 (accessed August 24, 2021).
- 3 Mansfield, Susan. »Alastair MacLennan: The most important Scottish artist you've never heard of«. The Scotsman. <https://www.scotsman.com/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/alastair-maclennan-most-important-scottish-artist-youve-never-heard-1443424>, August 7, 2017 (accessed August 25, 2021).

theatre and visual art which acknowledge experimental performance practices as marginal exceptions to a cultural tradition otherwise centred on dramatic playwriting and figurative or landscape painting.

Nonetheless, there remains a significant body of archival material which might support further research into the histories and futures of live art in Scotland. The most substantial collections residing in Scotland relating to live art practice are linked to multi-artform, building-based institutions. For example, the resource room of Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA) holds records of its own practices of programming, curation and artistic development as well as that of its precursor, *The Third Eye Centre*. These materials were catalogued and partially digitised as part of »The Glasgow Miracle« project, a collaboration between the CCA and Glasgow School of Art intended to »assist research and reflection upon the causes and conditions which encouraged the renaissance of the visual arts in Glasgow since the late 1970s«.⁴ Encompassing institutional records (budgets, artistic policies, planning documents and building development plans) and documentation of performance practice (videos, photographs and other ephemera), the CCA's holdings offer evidence of the material and curatorial infrastructures that might sustain live art practice or, alternatively, create the conditions in which it is possible for live art to exist in the first instance. Records of the Third Eye and CCA's status as both producer, promoter and touring venue (at different points of their existence) also indicate the place of Scottish arts centres and galleries in a larger, UK-wide network of artistic experiment and development. The preservation and accessibility of this material reflects CCA's own resilience in the face of series of significant financial crises and changes to the Scottish arts and culture funding environment since the early 1990s.

In contrast, the archival records of The Arches arts venue – a major hub for new performance and artist develop-

ment – are largely uncatalogued. Rescued at the moment of the venue's sudden closure following a licensing dispute in 2015 and now held as part of the Scottish Theatre Archive (STA) at the University of Glasgow, this material includes video documentation of commissioned and touring work as well as documentation relating to the venue's mixed programme of performance, festivals and clubbing, though the full extent of this collection remains as yet unclear. The precarious status of the Arches collection may exemplify the ways in which the resilience and legibility of institutional records are intimately bound up in the history of their parent institutions, the practices and resources which enabled those organisations to document their own activities, and the values and priorities which determined which elements of their work would be considered significant enough to preserve. These dynamics are exacerbated in the case of work developed by independent curators, groups or individual artists working outside of institutional and venue-based settings where there is no formal organisational structure in place to support such work. During my own research on the Arts and Humanities Research Council project »Live Art in Scotland«, I have been told that the archive of one significant festival was »on the floor in the spare room« of a flat rented by the one of the event's founding artistic directors who has since left the sector to work in another field. Correspondingly, the existence of personal collections of individual artists – including theatre-maker and performer Adrian Howells (held at the STA, Glasgow), artist, musician and NRLA master of ceremonies Ian Smith (held as part of the Theatre Collection, Bristol) and performance artist Alastair MacLennan (held at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, Dundee) – reflect significant practices of self-documentation and self-archiving carried out by artists within their own lifetimes.

The largest and arguably most comprehensive collection of materials relating to the history of live art in Scotland is the archive of the National Review of Live Art (NRLA), a festival staged regularly in venues across Glasgow following 1988 until its thirtieth edition in 2010.⁵ Programmed by

4 The Glasgow Miracle: Materials for Alternative Histories. <http://www.glasgowmiraclearchives.org>, 2012 (accessed September 6, 2021).

5 NRLA30: Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the National

performance curator and producer Nikki Milican, the NRLA played a leading role in the national and international development of live art practices – both as singular event and as part of a broader programme of events and artist development initiatives led by Milican's company New Moves International that included the dance festival New Moves, the international performance festival New Territories, and the Winter School programme of artist-led training workshops. As Jennie Klein notes, the NRLA's Platform strand of work by new and emerging artists – derived from a UK-wide series of sharings at venues and higher-education institutions – served to identify and support the early practice of a range of now major British live art practitioners including Curious (Helen Paris and Leslie Hill), Richard DeDomenici, FrenchMottershead, Sheila Ghelani and Kira O'Reilly.⁶ The longevity of the festival (and scope and significance Milican's work for which she was awarded the Order of the British Empire for services to performance art) means that the history of the NRLA is sometimes seen as offering a history of live art in the UK as a whole.

Originally held by the University of Glasgow, the NRLA's archive was later donated by Milican to Nottingham Trent University before moving to the University of Bristol's Theatre Collection where it currently resides.⁷ The NRLA archive is primarily a video archive that holds footage of performances alongside documentation of discussion events and interviews with artists, though also includes printed materials including brochures, press cuttings, funding applications and annual reports. Much of this material reflects the NRLA's own practices of self-fashioning and critical reflexivity, with artist interviews across several years – for example –

inviting commentary on the particular role of the festival in sustaining a community of critical generosity toward experimental practices. Mirroring the composition of the CCA / Third Eye collections, the scope of this material lends itself to a particular kind of materialist history – one that might attend to specific examples of live art practice and the infrastructures of curation, finance and venue that have shaped, enabled and sometimes foreclosed its existence.

While the relocation of the NRLA archive to England has enabled its preservation and the support of a dedicated team of archivists, this process has also subtly recontextualised its holdings. This is an effect of the archive's physical location and its co-location with the Record of Live Art Practice (RLAP), a major archive established in 1994 when the Arts Council of England invited Professor Barry Smith of Nottingham Trent University to formalise and expand his personal research collection. Though venues, festivals and artists based in Scotland are reflected within RLAP, the nature of their archival presence can sometimes give a misleading impression of the scope and scale of such activity. An envelope labelled »Live Art in Scotland«, for example, contains a single sheet of paper advertising a research consultancy. Engaging with RLAP in support of research concerning live art in Scotland may require extensive prior knowledge of the Scottish context and its physical/cultural geography: this includes the names of venues, artists and events whose location within or connection to Scotland is not apparent from the archive's catalogue, as well as the names of Scottish artists whose careers have led them to work for significant periods in other locations. In any case, working with the histories of the UK's smaller constituent nations often requires one to actively resist the presumption of an English centre in recognition of how the question of »small nationhood is inevitably bound up with questions of power and that the majority of small nations are, or have been, involved in contested definitions of identity of a particularly intense nature.«⁸

Review of Live Art. <https://nrla30.com> (accessed October 4, 2021).

6 Klein, Jennie. »Live Art in the UK«. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 32 (3), 2010, pp. 55–62, here: p. 55.

7 National Review of Live Art Archive. University of Bristol Theatre Collection, <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/theatre-collection/explore/live-art/national-review-of-live-art-archive/> (accessed September 6, 2021).

8 Blandford, Steve. »Introduction«. In Blandford, Steve (ed.). *Theatre and Performance in Small Nations*. Bristol, 2013, pp. 1–18, here: p. 3.

What might be involved, then, in bringing these and other archival collections – distributed across Scotland and the UK as a whole – into conversation with each other? And how might it enable a critical attentiveness to the specific conditions of practice in Scotland without failing to recognise the complex ways in which the different parts of the UK's arts ecology are intertwined? In considering these questions, I have turned to examine the strategies adopted by the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), London, in inviting engagements with their own significant resource library through »study room guides« which are intended to help visitors navigate its open-access collection of live art related videos, DVDs and publications. Commissioned from »artists and thinkers«, these texts exist alongside the study room's formal catalogue of its holdings to offer curated pathways or points of entry to LADA's diverse holdings. In LADA's own words, »the idea is to enable Study Room users to experience the materials in a new way and highlight materials that they may not have otherwise come across.«⁹

Beginning with Franko B's *The Body in Performance* (2005), these study room guides have reflected different strategies, themes and contexts for live art practice – serving to both interrogate and reproduce the tropes and concerns with which the field is most strongly associated. In this sense, the guides perform a kind of institutional critique addressing the status of marginalised artists and practices within mainstream institutions that also works to establish Live Art (capitalised) as its own institution, albeit one characterised by the flexibility, diversity and exploratory nature of the works within it. Growing at a rate of one or two year, the series now includes Adele Tan's (2008) guide profiling contemporary and historical performance art practices from China, Rachel Zerihan's (2009) series of reflections on performances created by audiences »for an audience of one«, Tracey Warr's (2015) text on remoteness, Nando Messias' (2018) exploration of effeminacy, queer visibility

and social violence, Daniel Oliver's (2019) work on neurodiversity and Arts Feminism Queer / CUNTemporary's (2020) curated guide to queer, feminist and decolonial ecologies in live art.¹⁰

In the first instance, we might imagine a study room guide simply titled »Live Art in Scotland« which proceeds by surfacing the materials relating to Scotland within LADA's collection and considers their relationship to formal strategies of cataloguing and labelling. This guide might include a reflection on the disparity between materials tagged with »Scotland« in the collection's database and the larger range of materials that relate to venues, locations and artists based in or relating to Scotland but whose connections are elided at the formal levels of fonds, series, file and item. Alternatively, one might emphasise dimensions of practice in Scotland that are currently underrepresented or absent by inviting reflections on the literal and figurative distances between LADA's physical resource room – housed in their premises in Bethnal Green, London – and the collection of Deveron Projects, in Huntly, Aberdeenshire, some 600 miles to the north. How might Deveron Projects' located practices of creative research and cultural engagement (exemplified in the slogan »The Town is the Venue«) inform the terms on which live art practices become valued and accessible to study beyond the immediate context of their enactment?

Such work might serve as the basis for a map of connections between the collections and archives noted above, fostering an expanded view of the UK's different sites of cultural production for live art that is sensitive to differing intensities and rhythms of action and association through which the UK's ecologies of live art practice have been sustained, and then become intelligible as part of live art's history. Doing so could involve reading examples of international practice into the narrative of live art and experimental performance's presence in Scotland while also considering how activity in Scotland has shaped practice elsewhere. For

9 »Visit the Study Room«. Live Art Development Agency, <https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/visit-the-study-room/> (accessed September 10, 2021).

10 »Study Room Guides«. Live Art Development Agency, <https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/study-room-guides/> (accessed September 10, 2021).

example, one might engage with the work of Chicago-based performance company Goat Island whose summer school model originated at Glasgow's CCA where commissions and residencies shaped the development of *How Dear To Me the Hour When Daylight Dies* (1996) and *The Sea & Poison* (1997). This, in turn, might elaborate an understanding of the connections between artistic activity and institutions in Scotland and that in other parts of the UK – noting, for example, the ecology of curation, co-commissioning and training extending between the CCA, Bristol's Arnolfini and Dartington College of Arts, each of which would host Goat Island's performances and workshops. Such a perspective might enable greater understanding of the significance of national and international patterns of artistic development and collaboration for a small nation with a correspondingly small resident artistic community.

In considering such an approach, I am mindful that LADA's study room guides reflect a distinct and successful history of advocacy for live art in England that has not been replicated across the rest of the UK. LADA's ongoing role in fostering live art as a privileged term for experimental and innovative arts practices in the UK context can be traced in part to the earlier work of its co-founder Lois Keidan in her role at the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) where she was responsible for national policy and provision for Performance Art and interdisciplinary practices. At that time, Keidan's *National Arts and Media Strategy: Discussion Document on Live Art* (1991) played a significant role in advocating for the terminology of live art as a flexible and responsive alternative to the »restrictive practice« of performance art, and one that might serve a »need to acknowledge innovative, challenging practices from diverse cultures beyond Eurocentric monocultural traditions.«¹¹ This perspective drew directly on the work of playwright Michael McMillan whose research report *Cultural Grounding* (1990) had argued for the revision of funding council art form definitions

¹¹ Keidan, Lois. *National Arts and Media Strategy: Discussion Document on Live Art*. Arts Council of Great Britain. London, 1991, p. 2.

that »by their nature, exclude[d] artists not working in a »white European tradition« and called for a greater degree of support for innovative work by Black artists and organisations through a revised approach to the funding of multi-based and interdisciplinary practice.¹² By the mid 1990s, this advocacy – together with the lobbying efforts of artists and promoters across the new work sector – had resulted in specific ACE grants and commissions for artists working within live art, the identification of regional arts officers with specific responsibility for the support and development of artists in that field and, by 1999, support for Keidan (who had since left the ACGB) to co-found LADA with producer and curator Catherine Ugwu.

These developments, however, were not mirrored in Scotland where live art retained a low profile within the structures and policies of the Scottish Arts Council (SAC). While Jeni Walwin's contribution to the 1991 book *Live Art* would identify the SAC's potential support to artists »in all media« through a range of bursaries and project assistance grants, it would remain unclear whether applications from live artists were anticipated or welcomed in practice.¹³ A review of publications produced by the SAC across this period, for example, reveals comparatively few references to live art – an omission which seems significant given the location of the NELA in Scotland as well as the scale of major programmes of live art and experimental theatre and performance at SAC-funded venues including the Third Eye Centre / CCA, Tramway and the Arches. Funding for such work was instead distributed primarily through committees overseeing dance, drama and »combined arts« (the latter term used in reference to multi-artform arts centres, festivals and interdisciplinary or cross-media practice). One significant exception takes the form of an infrastructure re-

¹² McMillan, Michael. *Cultural Grounding: Live Art and Cultural Diversity: Action Research Project. A report for the Visual Arts Department of the Arts Council of Great Britain*. Arts Council of Great Britain. London, 1990, p. 6.

¹³ Walwin, Jeni. »Funding«. In Ayers, Robert/Butler, David (eds.). *Live Art*. Newcastle, 1991, p. 112–125, here: p. 115.

port produced in 2007 which scoped the extent of the live art sector in Scotland and the significant challenges faced by those working in the field. In contrast with England, the report found there were no organisations in Scotland with long-term »Foundation« funding whose role was focused on the development and support of live art, no clear signposting that live art was eligible for funding and no capacity for artists to identify live art as their primary field of practice on point of application.¹⁴ These dynamics persist today, even as SAC's successor Creative Scotland continues to offer funding to venues closely associated with live art and significant project grants to festivals such as *Take Me Somewhere*, established in 2017 to build on the legacy of the Arches' arts programme.

These structural conditions continue to shape the possible existence of live art and its histories in Scotland, informing the existence and extent of the materials which might support and enable research into live art as well as the discursive space into which such histories might then emerge and be understood. Engaging with the archival histories of live art in Scotland, then, may require one to continually work with rather than simply seek to correct a pattern of absences and elisions by proposing new potential connections between disparate collections. This is also to understand that the circumstances which contributed to a fragmented and distributed knowledge of past practices might yet meaningfully inform the future of the field.

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¹⁴ Development of the Infrastructure and Support of Live Art in Scotland. Scottish Arts Council. Edinburgh, 2007.

This White Paper is the result of a cross-institutional collaboration between Scottish and German researchers, artists, and programmers. The volume brings together historical, theoretical, and digital research into archival practices of storing and dealing with »Live Art Data« in a comparative approach that encompasses both historical and contemporary practices. It is interested in data that is produced in theatres and other cultural venues, in theatre pedagogical projects, by performing artists, and their audiences. From an interdisciplinary perspective, the White Paper looks at archival configurations and relations of performative data in teaching and information infrastructures today, focusing on four aspects: historiography, theory, digitalization, and the international dimension.

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