

Welcome to LIVE AND NOW, a podcast series from the Live Art in Scotland project at the University of Glasgow – led by me, Steve Greer – exploring the histories and possible futures of live art and experimental performance in Scotland.

In each episode, you'll hear from one of more than 50 artists and practitioners interviewed for the project, as we explore their work, its influences and the circumstances which shaped its development. You'll hear from artists based in Scotland as well as those whose practice has seen them return here again and again over the past thirty years.

Each episode is accompanied by a transcript, context notes and links to the full interview – you can find these on the Live Art in Scotland website – [liveartscotland dot org](http://liveartscotland.org)

EPISODE INTRO

This episode features my conversation with Stewart Laing, a director and designer whose company Untitled Projects has been responsible for some of Scotland's most ambitious large-scale experimental theatre works – performances that think about the future by reinventing cultural history, taking films, novels, biographies and other media as the starting place for work which straddle installation, video, and live event.

As you'll hear us explore, Untitled Projects is a company which brings together a group of freelance artists and practitioners to collaborate – with a core group working together repeatedly with Stewart over the past twenty or so years.

I first encountered Untitled Project's work through a show called *Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner* – a performance lecture and exhibition purporting to tell the story of a young radical Scottish director making performances based on James Hogg's novel *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* in the run up to Glasgow's year as European City of Culture in 1990. The show is an extraordinary work of misdirection that offers a missing chapter in the history of Scottish experimental performance – supported by documentary-style vox-pops from well-known British theatre-makers.

Almost none of what we're shown actually happened.

This blurring of real and fictional worlds is also at work in National Theatre Scotland's THEM! directed by Laing, written by Pamela Carter and designed by Nick Millar. Staged as a live TV chat show in Tramway's cavernous main venue, the work then spilled out into a pop-up club space and then into the building's backstage corridors where a sprawling living installation held over 150,000 leaf cutter ants.

In the following excerpt from our longer conversation, we talk about some of the international artists and companies that informed the development of Stewart's practice as a director – and the changing landscape of Glasgow as a space for theatre and arts practice in the run up to and aftermath of 1990.

As I've begun to suggest in previous episodes, I'm interested in the moment of 1990 as a period of significant activity and change, not only in seeding future artistic developments or creating physical infrastructure – as in the form of the Tramway venue – but in how it has become part of the mythos of Glasgow as a city that has been a home for live art and other experimental practices in Scotland since the 1980s, and part of the story of Scotland more broadly as internationalist in its outlook and influences.

Like most of the recordings in the Live Art in Scotland collection, this conversation took place via Zoom in the first part of 2021 when we were practicing social distancing as part of our response to the global covid-19 pandemic.

Here's Stewart.

INTERVIEW EXCERPT

Stewart Laing (SL): Towards the end of the eighties, Derek Jarman was part of The National Review of Live Art in Glasgow and we had friends in common. Derek and I worked together in that I made the exhibition for him, I mean it was all Derek's ideas, but at the workshops at the Citz, the design department actually made the exhibition for him and through that, I was hanging about at The National Review of Live Art at the Third Eye Centre and I got really interested in it. I really liked Nikki, I think she was intrigued by the fact that I wasn't interested in live art and I think she took that as a challenge and she invited me to see things. So then I got really into live art performance through The National Review of Live Art. Also, Neil Bartlett was part of that, he was the sort of host of the festival. I was seeing work of his, like *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* to Glasgow and *Sarrasine* came to Glasgow, so

that was certainly a more performance end of theatre. Then when 1990 came and The Wooster Group were resident in Glasgow, I think that was maybe '89, that was the run up to the City of Culture. That post-dramatic view of theatre I find completely compelling. That sort of blew me away because I think that my interest up until that point had been really glossy, slightly unconventional versions of classic theatre, like Peter Stein, like the work they were doing at the Citz actually at that point. Yes, so I sort of feel like the whole live art thing came at me round about the same time, and seeing Gododdin at Tramway, seeing Brith Gof and then seeing Angus' work because I think Angus' work is definitely performance art I would say, it happens in the landscape, but it's performance. One of the things that absolutely amazed me about The Wooster Group, and it's something I talked to Liz LeCompte about, is that they do plays. That was what really excited me about getting to the point of The Wooster Group was that you could get the sensation of live art but you also got a Chekhov play or a Eugene O'Neill play. Liz absolutely identifies as a theatre director, if you ask her how she describes herself, she's a theatre director, she does plays. I think when I'm talking about the point where classic theatre and performance meet, I think for me The Wooster Group is definitely on that line. Frank Castorf, the work he was doing at the Volksbühne in Berlin, I think was this huge wave of post-dramatic theatre in Europe.

SG: As you were speaking, I was also thinking that when The Wooster Group were around, that's also the period where Goat Island was also visiting Glasgow for the first time. Did you come into contact with any of that work?

SL: Yes, I saw some of it. I think I saw it later actually when The National Review of Live Art was at The Arches, I think that's when I first saw Goat Island in performance. Oh god, what's the famous English live art company?

SG: Forced Entertainment?

SL: That's the one, thank you. That's where I came across their work as well.

SG: Maybe we can just go back, it was so interesting hearing you describe those influences like Brith Gof and The Wooster Group. I was thinking about both the scale of that work, and the way in which it works, for me, with space, [and] particularly with The Wooster Group [how] it works with film and TV and video.

SL: Yes, technology. Very much so. I found that amazing, it's the first time I'd seen televisions on the stage and that was definitely exciting. I'm sort of overlapping in my interview with Pamela, but hey. I think that Liz's dramaturgy, she's not looking for the dramatic in the play. My understanding is that in America when she was a teenager, she realised you could channel hop, like literally channel hop when you're watching the television, and I think that's her dramaturgy. It's a completely opposite dramaturgy to who is this character at the beginning of the play, how does that character develop through the play and how is the character different at the end of the play? It's a very formal thing of doing something for three minutes until you're bored of it, and then clicking to a different way of doing it. I find that really exciting.

SL: I think Mike Pearson's talked about or written about the idea of multi-track dramaturgies in the work of Brith Gof, that sometimes it's the text that's doing the work, but sometimes it's the space, or it's some other element of the music score, and it's to do with the mixing of tracks. It's a parallel logic between channel hopping and track mixing.

SL: It's something that sort of bugs me with conventional dramatic theatre, dramaturgy, it feels very monolithic. It feels like it's based on a very specific set of ideas, and it doesn't have any, for instance, aesthetic attitudes to how performance might unfold itself.

SG: Before we move on, you mentioned the moment of Glasgow in 1990 which has a sort of semi-mythic status in Scottish history or in Glasgow's history. I know it was definitely a moment where a huge amount of money if nothing else came into different cultural projects in the city, both in the years leading up to it and also leaving a legacy afterwards. What's your recollection of that moment? Because lots of things come out of that. You know The Arches has its feet in 1990? What's your memory of that period?

SL: I mean it was very interesting and very exciting, but I think that also the reason I think Glasgow got the City of Culture was because it was a really cultured city, you know it wasn't as if they were looking at this wasteland and they thought, how do we inject culture into it? The National Review of Live Art was there and at that point the Citz was still doing really interesting work. I sort of feel it's more like the culmination of something rather than this is when everything started. I get a bit tired with the idea that exciting performance started in Glasgow post-1990. The Mahabharata came to Tramway in 1988, The Wooster Group came

in 1989. It was all working towards 1990, but it's not like the gun went off in January 1990 and the arts in Glasgow changed.

SG: I'm conscious that you're working as a designer through this period and I'm thinking about when you started making or directing work. Would it have been at Tramway? Would it have been *The Homosexual*? Was that the first project you were the director of?

SL: Yes, actually I co-directed it with a friend of mine who was an actor called Gerrard McArthur and actually one of your questions was about institutions that I felt were supporting my practice. It was absolutely one hundred per cent Steve Slater's years of programming at Tramway. I mean it was Tramway that I knew I could go to with an idea and however tenuous the idea was, I think they had an idea that they were investing in artists rather than the specific ideas of artists so they were very open to whatever you would take to them.

SG: I'm sort of conscious that a major part of Tramway's profile, both then and now, was the fact that it had a huge gallery space, so there wasn't just the theatre space in the form of Tramway 1 but there was a visual arts programme, a really high profile one actually feeding into it at the same time. Was that part of your encounter as a venue that sort of programming is part of that conversation of those two domains?

SL: Oh yes. Completely. You know seeing amazing theatre in the gallery space, it's a real pity how they seem so separated now. The black space and the white space, it feels like there's very little interaction. I remember one year Nikki programmed The National Review of Live Art in the big gallery space and it was just amazing. I think there were three groups working there in a durational piece at one time, and also Keni did his James Joyce project, there was one of those that happened in the gallery space. It's very exciting. Actually *The Homosexual* was programmed in the gallery space as well, they built like a little [inaudible].

SG: Okay. I found a letter from around the time when there were plans in place that Scottish Ballet would take over that space and it would flip from being a performance space into rehearsal studios and that plan was ultimately abandoned. But I found a letter that you'd written maybe to The List or a newspaper, saying how essential that space had been to your practice.

SL: Oh my god! [Laughs] Yes, that's interesting. I can't even remember writing that letter, but yes, great.

SG: I'll see if I can find it [laughs].

SL: Yes, if you want to send me a link to it, that would be great. Tramway is really close to my heart actually and the fact that Take Me Somewhere sort of has a permanent home there, I think is fantastic.

SG: I'm just thinking about some of the works that you've staged at Tramway, maybe this leads us into talking about just your work and how it's developed and some of the relationships in it as well. There was the J G Ballard sequence, which was staged at Tramway, if I've got my notes right, that's *Myths of the Near Future*, *The Enormous Space* and *The Drowned Giant*, and I've got it in my head that *The Drowned Giant* was in that Tramway too, was in that space?

SL: It's weird because Steve commissioned that piece just before Tramway was renovated and the period where we were meant to do our development, Tramway wasn't available to us so we ended up doing everything off-site in sort of site-specific spaces, so actually *The Drowned Giant* we originally made and performed in a shop in the high street, but it used architectural models of Tramway 2. So the idea was always to invent a project that was going to happen but taking advantage of the fact that we all knew it wasn't going to happen, so it was a sort of model presentation for a project that we knew was impossible to stage at Tramway. Then when we did all three projects together, we did that project on the balcony, which at that point was open and looked over Tramway 2 so that people could look at the model boxes and look at the space at the same time, which was nice, it was really great.

OUTRO

The production archive of *The Drowned Giant* – alongside records of Untitled Projects other works – is housed at the Scottish Theatre Archive at the University of Glasgow where the collection includes scripts, research materials, photographs, videos, and sound recordings. For information on access, visit the library website at archives dot gla dot ac dot uk.

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You can find more episodes of this series with links to the full interview archive – along with the project’s other free resources - on our website, Live Art Scotland dot org.