

Welcome to LIVE and NOW, a new 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 an excerpt from my conversation with collaborative performance maker, performer and teacher, Karen Christopher.

For the last decade or so, Karen's practice has focused on creating a series of duet performances devoted to re-examining the collaborative performance-making process. At the end of 2021, Karen published *Entanglements of Two* – a book co-edited with Mary Paterson – exploring that body of work alongside wider reflections on the duet as a concept in artistic and social life.

This body of work has emerged from a longer period – some twenty years - as a core member of the Chicago-based collaborative performance group Goat Island, who disbanded in 2009 after creation of their ninth and final work, a piece called *The Last Maker*.

And Goat Island is where we pick up the story of Karen's work in Scotland, in a conversation where we explored the company's longstanding relationship with Glasgow – first performing *We Got A Date* as part of Mayfest in 1990 during Glasgow's year as European City of Culture, returning to the city in 1996 for a residency at the Centre for Contemporary Art where they would develop *How Dear To Me the Hour When Daylight Dies* - as well as many occasions after that as part of the New Territories festival of International performance.

Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Art was also the site of the first Goat Island summer school, a unique long-form programme of workshops and creative encounters intended to allow artists from a wide range of disciplines to explore new forms of individual and

collective expression, with invited creative scholars offering presentations that blurred the distinctions between academic paper and personal response, between discourse and dialogue, between reason and art.

First staged in Scotland then across the UK and internationally, Goat Island's summer schools have had a lasting influence on a generation of live art practitioners.

This interview – like most of the others in the collection – was recorded on zoom during 2021 when we were adapting to new ways of remote working during the pandemic:

INTERVIEW EXCERPT

SG: What do you remember about the CCA around that time because I know that this was the run up before the summer school. I guess the first one of that was in 1996. Part of what I've been reading about, and this is going into Mark Waddell's records of his time there, was talking about the relationship between commissioning and residencies and wanting to be able to create spaces for companies to spend time at the CCA as part of presenting or finishing work, or just exploring elements of their practice.

KC: Yes. Mark was really key for a while for us in terms of being someone (who didn't work for us) who would sit us down and say we need to come up with a plan for what's next, what are you going to do next? If you could do anything . . . and that's how the summer school was born. It was really born out of Mark Waddell's head fully formed in some ways because that was part of a jam session to come and think about what you would do. He liked to use the word launch, and now we know that everyone talks about launches in Britain, but we just thought it was bizarre that he always said we need to launch this or launch that [laughs]. We were just like are we going in a rocket [laughs]? He would have all these terms and say we need to have a session to talk about this and now I can't remember what they all were. He would get us together and say we have to have this strategic planning for you. He was using wacky words though. Anyway, he had this plan for us to expand and next time you come, what could we add to it, so we talked about doing some kind of long workshop that would be three or four weeks and would let people come and stay. It was a really big plan originally and Mark made sure a lot of money was raised for it and we also did but it had to scale down. We did it for four weeks and it was truly amazing. Francis McKee was there as a guest and did an amazing talk about research which I can still

remember. He talked about being a culture historian and the ice cream parlours in Glasgow and Italians intervening on people's ability to meet knee-to-knee in the evening because it was respectable at an ice cream parlour. The mothers of the women would never have let them go into a pub. At any rate the ice cream wars of Glasgow were one of the things he talked about, but there were a number of things and he helped break open the kind of things that were part of a package of what we were trying to deliver to the people who were there in terms of what is research, what is a strategy for making a performance, and how do you think about it, how do you train yourself, what kinds of things do you allow to be part of the work. We wanted it to be a workshop in the true sense of a workshop and not a big teaching thing. Most of what happened was the participants actively making and they were all people who had started on their careers of making work, they were just very early in their careers. There was Donna Rutherford, Russell MacEwan, Minty Donald, Dave Richmond and Jules who are at York St. John, and Clare Thornton who died recently, and, of course, Steve Bottoms who was at a number of workshops. I think he was at that first one. He did three of them. Do you know Steve Bottoms?

SG: Yes, I do. Not very well, but I do know him.

KC: Maybe he was teaching at the University of Glasgow, I can't remember now.

SG: I don't know the exact dates, but he was teaching there.

KC: Yes, so I think he was nearby and that made it easy, but still, I think he got into this idea that he wanted to do it again and see how it was different every time. There was also a person who I've kept in touch with, Alyson Hallett and Lucy Skaer and Ross.

SG: Ross Birrell?

KC: Yes, Ross Birrell. He was amazing. He levitated the . . .

SG: Was it the Gallery of Modern Art that he was involved in?

KC: Yes, that wasn't part of the Goat Island thing, but he had us all come along. Anyway, the idea was to have this kind of working environment where everyone would make and incorporate theory into the process of making, so to confuse the creative with the critical and kind of say that these things go hand in hand and they're all about making the work. There were talks that people came to give, or that we gave, in the afternoons and there was

a lot of working time, and we gave little instigations. We had so much fun because four of us ran it and we had a little walking tour we had to take and it would include some kind of site that we were going to as research such as the fishmonger; the cheese shop, I. J. Mellis on Great Western Road; St Vincent, that big, strange church that's on a corner; the Zen garden at St Mungo's; and there were some baths that were really amazing. These kinds of places. We would take a group there and would be some research filter so that you think about what you saw with certain ideas in mind that varied every time. It might just be "shifting figures around a steady centre," or look for that kind of thing, or an architectural feature. The filter would be the same for every site but each group had a different site so would think of it differently. People would make a performance based on what they had gathered from the site. There were ways in which the city itself was finding its way into the room up in the old CCA. That crushed room, the way it used to be, had a ceiling that was so low. It was a fantastic room and everything that had ever been performed in that room came up through the cracks in the boards when you pounded on it, all the dust of all the shows before and lots of glitter. It was quite an amazing room to be in. I find it really interesting that sometimes it's these old, difficult, problematic rooms in places that weren't necessarily built for what they ended up being, that house the most generative times of a group or a person's work. You find yourself having to live into the space in order to make the most of it and it affects you as much as you affect it. Whereas if you go into a pristine space, there is almost no interaction with you and the space because the space is complete already. I remember, this is not anything to do with your question but it's hugely important and hugely important about Glasgow in the scheme of things and the way that we were able to organise ourselves there with a kind of openness, because the CCA was this set of galleries, a shop, and a café, there was a whole life around it. That was hugely important because we would always meet and know the people who were having the show in the gallery downstairs or have coffee in the café and meet other artists who hung out there. There were a lot of people who we were also influenced by, including Maurice O'Connell who did three weeks of painting Os and the Os were posted all over the gallery. He was artist in residence at the city council or something and sat in on council meetings. Anyway, so that stuff would happen but also, we agreed to have open rehearsals in the afternoon. In the mornings we were shut, but in the afternoons, people could come up and because people were comfortable with the CCA, they would go in and if they saw there was an open

rehearsal and the front of house staff would say and people would come up. You had to go up the side stairs to find us there. I think we had two weeks and then a work-in-progress showing on this one occasion, but it might have been four. Sometimes we had quite a lot of time there. I can't remember, but we were there for some time and this guy who was an unemployed bricklayer had come up a few times and we started talking to him. You didn't talk to everyone who came up because you're working, but this guy we had struck up a conversation with. He told us he was unemployed and he was on the dole but he decided to use this time to improve himself, so he was going to art things in the town. We were impressed and very interested and he came back again and eventually he came and he saw the work-in-progress. The piece he was coming to watch was *How Dear To Me the Hour When Daylight Dies* and there's this tiny LED light that has a little battery that it's hooked up to and it's wrapped in black electrical tape and then there's a little wire hook on it. It's just a tiny LED that's smaller than the tip of my finger. It gets hung up on the wall that is on Sauchiehall Street, so a brick wall. He'd seen us put it up there before at the rehearsals during the day, but at the work-in-progress, there were all these other artists there and the lights were on, and the lights were out outside and on inside and I think he was really transported in a way he hadn't been before. He said to me afterwards that his favourite part was when I went up and opened a little window to the outside and the light came in and I said but I didn't do that, I hung a light on the wall. He said no, no, I mean when you opened the window and then we could see the outside. Sometimes after a show when your head is a little rearranged you can't edit yourself and I just wanted to be so honest with this guy for some reason, I don't know why, but I could've just said, oh great, I'm glad you liked it because it was his favourite part of the show after all. I just thought it was so odd that he thought I'd opened a window so I said come over here, I'm going to show you and I took him to the wall where it was still hanging there and I turned it on to show him and he was really mystified because he had really seen something different. He's a bricklayer, he's going to know that you're not going to open a tiny little window, plus it was dark outside! It wasn't that kind of thing. I think he had this experience of this window opening. It's the end of the piece and it is meant to be like there is a distant light out there. This is a kind of experience that you can't have if you aren't in a place where you can have a connection with a guy like this guy who is not an artist and who is having the top of his head blown off in some ways by the contact with this other world that he didn't really have a contact with and us by him.

OUTRO

Karen's most recent projects in Scotland include THICK TIME RADIO, a workshop programme designed to explore approaches to co-mentoring relationships between artists. Staged at the Hyde Park Art Center and Experimental Station, Chicago in 2019 and as part of Take Me Somewhere's online programme in 2021, THICK TIME RADIO sets out to create a reciprocal form of mentoring in which artists are invited to explore their own each others practice through strategies that blur the boundaries between making and finding.

This episode was produced by me, Steve Greer, as part of the Live Art in Scotland project supported by the University of Glasgow and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

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.