

From the ‘miraculous’ to the radical: towards a methodology for researching live art and performance art in Scotland

How might we engage with the incomplete history of live art and performance art in Scotland? And how might that fragmentary record itself constitute a story of the conditions in which live art has been fostered, promoted and sustained? Working from the flawed but persistent premise that “performance art is little seen or made in Scotland” and the semi-mythic status of its existence in relation to what Swiss curator Hans Ulrich-Obrist once termed the “Glasgow miracle”, I consider how performance research might work with (rather than simply seek to correct) evidence of absence and institutional neglect. Doing so is valuable because it might serve a closer interrogation of live art and performance arts’ own political and cultural economy – by which I mean the complex relationships of form, event and infrastructure evident in the ways in which artists, producers, programmers and performance curators have sought to collaborate, within and in resistance of institutional spaces.

Since early 2021, I have sought to explore the uncertain history of Scottish experimental performance through the Live Art in Scotland project, a research enquiry based in Theatre Studies at the University of Glasgow and funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through a Leadership Fellowship grant.¹ My original proposal to the AHRC was that there was a significant gap in existing histories of theatre and performance in Scotland which tended to emphasise a tradition of plays and playwriting, with performance practices taking something other than a literary text as their centre included as exceptions if

¹ The Live Art in Scotland project was supported by an Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellowship and the University of Glasgow – I am grateful to both for their generous support. For further information and to access the interview collection along with a range of other free research resources, visit <https://liveartscotland.org/>.

they were included at all. These dynamics could be understood in relation to the broader status of theatre in Scotland as a cultural practice which has been “under-researched or, if researched, under-represented in general histories.”² At the same time, I suggested that histories of visual art were dominated by a dispute between figurative and conceptual practices, with performance or time-based modes most often pushed into the margins. Moreover, extant studies of Live Art in the UK had tended to overlook Scotland in favour of an emphasis on England or had failed to engage with Scotland as a specific context for interdisciplinary and experimental performance with conditions paralleling but distinct from those in other parts of the United Kingdom because of the country’s complex history of devolved cultural and political leadership – both before and since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999.³

The Live Art in Scotland project has thus drawn on oral histories and archival research to develop an expanded account of live art and experimental performance practices in Scotland, focusing on a period starting in the late 1980s – when the term “live art” emerged as a preferred alternative to performance art in UK arts discourse – and working through to the mid-2010s when a number of key organisations involved in live art in Scotland had been forced to closed or had significantly changed the focus of their work. This research has entailed interviewing more than 50 artists and other practitioners – curators, technicians, producers, newspaper critics and more – who have been active in Scotland over that thirty-year period while undertaking parallel research in a number of underutilised collections in Scotland and across the UK, discussed further below. In pursuing these strategies, I have not

² Ian Brown, “A Lively Tradition and Creative Amnesia,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 3.

³ Existing accounts of live art in the UK include Deirdre Heddon and Jennie Klein’s *Histories and Practices of Live Art* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), Theron Schmidt’s *Agency: A Partial History of Live Art* (London: Intellect, 2019) and Maria Chatzichristodoulou’s *Live Art in the UK: Contemporary Performances of Precarity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

approached archive or testimony as the sources of fixed historical knowledge but worked from recognition of the inherently contingent nature of any body of historical evidence, wherein whatever an archive may contain is already “a reconstruction—a recording of history from a particular perspective; it thus cannot provide transparent access to the events themselves.”⁴ In the context of theatre and performance art history, we may be especially familiar with arguments for how the record of time-based and process-oriented practices suffer from the historical prioritisation of the text-based archive wherein “the repertoire – the archive of embodied memory, oral history, the experiences and traces of performance – has been given less significance than it might have been”.⁵ From this perspective we might also recognise the particular challenges involved in developing any history of live art or performance art – that is, when the partiality of the archive meets the ephemerality of experiential arts practices.

Nonetheless, the progress of this research has involved a shift from an emphasis on archival and oral history research as primarily corrective strategies (with each form supporting the other to address a gap in historical knowledge) toward an understanding of the potentiality of working *with* their partiality. In moving between institutional and personal accounts, I have been repeatedly reminded that “the archive is made from the selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past *and* from the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there”.⁶ The same may be true of memory – what we recall or choose to recall is not reducible to choice alone but reflects an uncertain mix of wilful forgetting and accidental recall. To pursue a history of live art is to engage with the

⁴ Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4, no. 1 (2004): 14.

⁵ Maggie B. Gale and Ann Featherstone, “The Imperative of the Archive: Creative Archive Research,” in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 17–40.

⁶ Carolyn Steedman, “The Space of Memory: In an Archive,” *History of the Human Sciences* 11, no. 4 (1998): 67.

contingency of original events and their trace, and – I suggest – to open up the terms of that contingency to study, given how it might express the uncertain and unstable infrastructural and curatorial logics which have enabled and sometimes constrained the possibilities of experimental performance practices. Making sense of those logics, though, requires us to simultaneously consider the narratives which operate to naturalise their operation in advance – that is, the stories which make the appearance or disappearance of live art and its possible history unremarkable.

Live art versus performance art

This effort is further complicated by the contentious relationship of live art to performance art in the UK context. While the terms are sometimes still used interchangeably, the use of “live art” in preference to performance art has a specific lineage, emerging in artists’ discourse in the late 1970s to describe multi- and interdisciplinary arts practices that challenged the traditional disciplinary distinctions of visual art, theatre, music and dance. Nick Kaye points to how the difficulty in pinning down what live art refers to may be part of what makes it attractive, “smacking as it does of the ‘contemporary’, the ‘experimental’, of something in the process of being formed, of something yet to be absorbed into an agreed set of terms or practices”.⁷ Yet as Dominic Johnson has described, the term “live art” has undergone a series of shifts in meaning, initially appearing in the pages of *Performance Magazine* where Rob La Frenais sought to characterize a diversity of “anti-establishment” arts practices and, evolving as what was hoped to be a more inclusive alternative to the term performance art which was understood as referring to a specific type of visual art, grounded

⁷ Nick Kaye, “Live art: Definition and documentation,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 2, no. 2 (1994): 1.

in the use of the body as its primary material.⁸ While live art may have much in common with performance art in bearing the influences of Happenings, Fluxus, installation art and body art, scholars such as Beth Hoffmann and Laura Shalson have interrogated the particular relationship of live art to theatre – both as an enduring attachment and in opposition.⁹

At the same time, the development of the term live art has a distinctive institutional history connected to attempts by the UK's arts and culture funding bodies to expand the range of practices and communities of practice who might be in receipt of public money. An early, significant influence on that development was playwright Michael McMillan's report *Cultural Grounding* (1990) which was commissioned by the visual arts department of the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) to address a simple question: "why are there so few Black performance artists?" McMillan's report would address this question but go far beyond it in diagnosing the problems with the arts council's existing approach to perceiving contemporary Black art and its reliance on criteria for performance art which were based on a white European tradition. Recognising the contribution of Black art – and that of contemporary art in the UK more broadly – would necessitate a serious critique of the notion of art form "discipline" itself. McMillan's report informed the *National Arts and Media Strategy: Discussion Document on Live Art* (1991), authored by Lois Keidan, later co-founder of the Live Art Development Agency with Catherine Ugwu. In this document, Keidan would make the argument that developments in artistic practice as well as the need to "acknowledge innovative challenging practices from diverse cultures beyond Eurocentric monocultural traditions" had necessarily led the Arts Council's Performance Art Advisory

⁸ Dominic Johnson, "Introduction: The What, When and Where of Live Art," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 1 (2012): 5-6.

⁹ See Lara Shalson, "On the Endurance of Theatre in Live Art," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 1 (2012): 106-119, and Beth Hoffman, "Radicalism and the Theatre in Genealogies of Live Art," *Performance Research* 14, no. 1 (2009): 95-105.

group to propose changing its terminology “from the ‘restrictive practice’ of Performance Art to the flexibility and responsiveness of the term Live Art.”¹⁰

The capitalisation of Live Art is itself revealing: Johnson suggests “that in the UK, Performance Art is a formal tradition, while Live Art is a sector”,¹¹ operating as a strategic frame invoked by artists, curators and programmers in drawing together a diverse and potentially unrelated range of activities in a manner that makes them intelligible to conventional funding structures. It is further significant, then, that the Scottish Arts Council has a parallel but distinct history to that of the Arts Council of Great Britain, even prior to the formal establishment of Creative Scotland as an autonomous body in 1994.¹² While live art emerged as the preferred if not privileged term for experimental, interdisciplinary performance in England, it has been used sparingly in the Scottish funding context, even during the years when the Scottish Arts Council and later Creative Scotland funded the National Review of Live Art as the UK’s leading international festival dedicated to work from across the sector. In the following discussion, then, I briefly scope the nature of the archival collections which have informed the Live Art in Scotland project to date before turning to consider key narratives about Scottish culture in which they might be located. In doing so, I suggest how notions of cultural exceptionalism –in the double sense of a temporary break from the rule, and something unique and therefore valuable – may provide for an understanding of how possible knowledge about live art in Scotland has been produced, circulates and may be interrogated.

¹⁰ Lois Keidan, *National Arts and Media Strategy: Discussion Document on Live Art* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1991).

¹¹ Johnson, 7.

¹² For discussion of the historical development of the Scottish Arts Council’s quasi-autonomous status, see Susan Galloway and Huw David Jones, “The Scottish dimension of British arts government: a historical perspective,” *Cultural Trends* 19, no. 1-2 (2010): 27-40.

Memory and archive – the traces of Live Art in Scotland

The most substantial collections residing in Scotland which relate to live art practice are linked to multi-artform, building-based institutions. As I have described in a contribution to LIVE ART DATA – a collaborative project between archivists, theatre historians and performance researchers at the University of Glasgow, Stiftung Universität Hildesheim and Hochschule Osnabrück – these materials encompass organisational records such as budgets, artistic policies, planning documents and building development plans alongside documentation of performance practice in the forms of videos, photographs and other ephemera.¹³ For example, Glasgow’s Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA) holds over thirty years of materials relating to its 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”.¹⁴ While these materials are now readily accessible, the records of The Arches arts venue – a major hub for live art, new performance and artist development – are largely uncatalogued. Rescued at the moment of the venue’s sudden closure in 2015 and now held as part of the Scottish Theatre Archive (STA) at the University of Glasgow, these materials include documentation relating to the venue’s mixed programme of performance, festivals and clubbing as well as some video documentation of touring and in-house productions, though the full extent of this collection remains as yet unclear.¹⁵

¹³ See Stephen Greer, ‘Absent histories: working with the archival traces of live art in Scotland’ in *Live Art Data: New Strategies in Theatre Archiving. Neue Strategien der Theaterarchivierung Scotland // Niedersachsen* (Hildesheim: Universitätsverlag Hildesheim, 2021).

¹⁴ See “The Glasgow Miracle: Materials for Alternative Histories,” 2013, <https://www.glasgowmiraclearchives.org/>.

¹⁵ Greer, 75.

The largest 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. Programmed by performance curator and producer Nikki Milican, the NRLA played a leading role in the national and international development of live art practices – both as a singular event and as part of a broader ecology of events and artist development initiatives that included the dance festival New Moves, the international performance festival New Territories, and the Winter School programme of artist-led training workshops.¹⁶ Now held as part of the theatre Collection at the University of Bristol, England, the nature of the NRLA collection lends itself to a particular mode of materialist analysis insofar as video documentation of a wider range of individual artist’s work is held alongside production, marketing, funding and other organisational materials. This collection has been supplemented more recently by the NRLA30 website, curated by Milican to celebrate the 2010 edition of the NRLA when artists from across the festival’s 30-year history were invited to present new work.¹⁷ Freely accessible online, the site holds 75 videos of performances and other live events alongside essays, articles and reflections contributed by those involved in the festival’s long-running existence.

These and other institutional collections exist alongside a range of smaller though still highly significant archives or “resource rooms” held by independent artist-run spaces and galleries, and a major dimension of the Live Art in Scotland project has been mapping these materials so that they might more visible and more easily accessible to other researchers. One of the

¹⁶ Greer, 76.

¹⁷ See NRLA30, 2020, <https://nrla30.com/>.

early outcomes of the project has been a directory which offers an annotated listing of resources which might support further research into interdisciplinary, experimental performance practices and the structures which sustain them.¹⁸ Such work draws on but seeks to extend the efforts of other researchers by putting a broad range of archives and collections in conversation with each other, in a manner which hopefully reflects and responds to the varied contexts and artistic lineages that might comprise a history of live art. This strategy is also informed by the desire to respond to the reality of how the work of Black and global majority, queer, working class and disabled artists remains frequently underrepresented. This entails recognising how the collections on which live art researchers may depend are themselves structured by and act as a form of evidence for historical patterns of exclusion: they are the legacy of programming, funding and curatorial practices that have emphasised the work of primarily white European performance artists. Intervening within those legacies is important because of how they may sustain self-reinforcing narratives about the forms that live art might take, and the communities of practice involved in its production – both in the past, and in the future. As Gale and Featherstone suggest, “the archive becomes part of the justificatory discourse of funding because it catalogues, makes orderly and accessible past events, performances, programmes, transcripts of interviews, etc., giving them an imagined relevance in the future.”¹⁹

Anxieties about the terms on which any history of live art in Scotland might be (re)constructed have recurred throughout the Live Art in Scotland interview process, most often with contributors stopping to search – and oftentimes fail to recall – the exact details of names, places, works or events, and repeatedly apologising for gaps in their memories, with it

¹⁸ See *Live Art Scotland: Research Resources* at Live Art in Scotland, 2022, <https://liveartscotland.org/index.php/live-art-research-resources/>.

¹⁹ Gale and Featherstone, “The Imperative of the Archive: Creative Archive Research,” 18.

sometimes falling to me as the notional historian to officially confirm “yes, that’s when it happened” or “no, I don’t think so but I will try to check.” In practice, it has sometimes involved two people on either side of a Zoom call Googling for names and dates. The open questions “what do you recall?” or “do you remember anything?” have frequently been heard or understood as something more precise and demanding – leading me to take greater care in communicating the expectations of the interview process, as well as in enabling interviewees to add further details during review of their interview transcript. This has been particularly important when interviewees have later recalled names of collaborators whose names were lost in the flow of conversation but also where there is the feeling of a need to “get the record straight”. However, I remain motivated to work with rather than merely seek to correct the nature of imperfect recall – as these gaps and later insertions are markers of the labour involved in constituting a history, signifying what has been recalled but also pointing to the existence of that which remains left out, and which cannot be recovered.

In the archives, a parallel but subtly different set of dynamics have emerged – and patterns of absence that I am similarly interested in working *with* rather than simply seeking to remedy because of how they might offer their own histories of performance art and live art’s uncertain infrastructures. As noted above, the CCA’s archives contain the records of its precursor organisation, the Third Eye Centre. A number of boxes relating to that period were water damaged some twenty or more years ago, with a few being destroyed completely. It also seems likely that some records may be missing because key individuals took those materials with them when they left because they were seen as personal rather than institutional records, and necessary to the continuation of that individual’s practice elsewhere. Beyond the resulting gaps in correspondence or planning documentation, these absences tell us something about the quasi-autonomous status of those individuals’ work for that

institution – or, more accurately, how they perceived their work, perhaps as independent artists or practitioners who also happened to be employees and whose relationship to institutions was a strategic choice that gave them access to the resources they needed to curate, commission or make the work which most interested them. What I am suggesting, then, is that the incomplete or fragmentary status of such collections is not simply a problem to be solved in the course of assembling a coherent history but something which might manifest the precarious and shifting circumstances in which live art and performance art has been developed, promoted and presented in Scotland to date.

‘Performance art is little seen or made in Scotland’

Reading alongside and against the grain of archival and oral evidence thus becomes necessary to the possibility of interrogating the legacy of historical practices as they continue to shape current conditions of possibility for live art practices. Equally important, though, is an examination of the cultural narratives which govern the intelligibility of such evidence. In navigating this territory, I have found myself tracing a persistent narrative trope at the end of the 1980s and start of the 1990s when the National Review of Live Art first became established in Scotland. In its simplest form, this story appears as the passing claim that “performance art is little seen or made in Scotland”.²⁰ Presented as a truism without the need for further explanation, this claim has seemed to circulate in relation to the belief that “something is noticeably lacking in Scottish art: a tradition of performance art” – a situation owing, one journalist suggested, to the absence of an art school with a so co-called “third area” relating to “time-based media, video, installation and so forth” despite the existence of burgeoning interdisciplinary programmes engaging with video media at Duncan of

²⁰ “Art Listings,” *The List*, August 1987, 59.

Jordanstone College of Art & Design and public art and environmental practices at Glasgow School of Art.²¹ When Milican curated the ground-breaking *New Work / No Definition* season of theatre, dance, installation art and video art as a joint venture between the Third Eye, Glasgow and Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre in 1987, the season was positioned in the Scottish press as "a major step forward in making available to Scottish audiences recent developments in what has been known as 'performance art'" – in other words, granting access to something that did not otherwise exist in the country on its own terms.²² Narratives concerning performance art that did exist in the popular imagination of the press had previously centred on the salacious misrepresentation of body art – as in the coverage of installation works by artists Alastair MacLennan and Nigel Rolfe as involving 'naked men cavorting' in front of 'members of the public, including women and children'²³ – or on the work of singular figures, perhaps most notably artists introduced to Scotland through the work of artist and promoter Richard Demarco, credited with introducing Tadeusz Kantor, Marina Abramović and Joseph Beuys to British audiences in the 1960s and 70s through events such as *Strategy Get Arts*, held in the summer of 1970 at Edinburgh College of Art. Such events have most often been understood as singular, exceptional interventions rather than part of a longer standing and localised patterning of experimental and interdisciplinary practices. Here, Demarco's complex and sometimes fractious relationships with Scotland's established arts institutions and funding bodies may be an important factor. Though significant resources have been committed to digitising his archive, Demarco has reportedly considered destroying his personal collection of photographs and art works for lack of a

²¹ Hilary Robinson, "Still Live," *The List*, September 1990, 61.

²² "New Work No Definition," *The List*, October 1987, 1.

²³ Gordon Beattie, "Nake Fury: Storm over naked men in city art centre shows", *Glasgow Evening Times*, January 19, 1982.

secure and accessible home for these materials after his death: “Who is going to bother looking at this? Do I burn this, get rid of it, because no-one’s interested in it?”²⁴

The presumptively marginal status of this work has been compounded by the narration of Scottish visual art as centred on a figurative, painterly classical tradition. Curator Keith Hartley’s introduction to the exhibition catalogue of *The Vigorous Imagination: New Scottish Art* at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in 1987 as part of the Edinburgh International Festival, for example, would locate the skill of its contributing artists in the refusal of Scottish art schools to abandon “a very thorough, very traditional training” grounded in life class drawing and painting; if until very recently, performance art had “played a very small part in Scottish art”, this was seemingly not to its detriment.²⁵ Historian Craig Richardson calls attention to the preface offered by Richard Calvocoressi, Keeper of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, to the same catalogue: “With notable exceptions, the succeeding waves of post-war international avant-garde have passed Scotland by. Certainly, their ebb and flow left marks on Scottish art, but few Scottish artists took an active part in the movements.”²⁶ One response to this context might involve disputing or verifying the claim on performance art’s absence in Scottish culture – either by evidencing the moments of its historical emergence or disputing the narrow and often Eurocentric frame through which experimental or interdisciplinary work becomes intelligible as performance art. Alternatively, it might entail a fuller account of the discontinuous history of performance art in Scotland – present but concentrated around key historical moments and contexts. I am, though, more interested in a methodology which examines how the frame of

²⁴ Richard Demarco quoted in Brian Ferguson, “Richard Demarco Considers Burning Vast Edinburgh Festival Art Archive as ‘No-One Gives a Damn about It,’” *The Scotsman*, September 2021.

²⁵ Keith Hartley, *The Vigorous Imagination: New Scottish Art* (Edinburgh: Scottish National Galleries, 1987), 16-17.

²⁶ Richard Calvocoressi quoted in Craig Richardson, *Scottish Art since 1960: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Overviews* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 115.

absence/presence has been established, sustained over time and then put to work in service of particular personal, cultural or curatorial agendas.

It is not incidental that a number of major archival collections relating to performance art and live art in Scotland – including that of the National Review of Live Art, noted above, and the artist, performer and director of Mischief La Bas, Ian Smith – are no longer held in Scotland. While major projects undertaken at the University of Dundee have sought to digitise and make freely available the archives of performance artist Alastair MacLennan and curator Richard Demarco, Scottish cultural commentators have continued to approach such work as an exception to the story we might otherwise tell about Scottish performance. As recently as 2017, the *Scotland on Sunday* national newspaper headlined MacLennan as “the most Scottish important artist you’ve never heard of.”²⁷ This narrative construction is exceptional in the sense of neither wholly excluding or including MacLennan from common knowledge of art and performance in Scotland, serving to simultaneously affirm and contain the possible terms of its existence.

Scottish antitheatricalism and the explicit body

In identifying these dynamics and their consequences, I am keen to distinguish between recognition of a particular set of material conditions born of Scotland’s cultural infrastructures and their histories – including the nature of Scotland as a small country with a correspondingly smaller, located artistic community than neighbouring England – and the ways in which such a reality has been understood as simply existing. That is, understood not

²⁷ Susan Mansfield, “Alastair MacLennan: The Most Important Scottish Artist You’ve Never Heard Of,” *Scotland on Sunday*, August 7, 2017.

as the result of the shifting interplay of geographic, social or economic conditions but as expressive of some deeper or even fundamental “truth” about the nature of Scottish culture. In this respect, the belief that performance art is persistently in the state of being imported from elsewhere rather than having local roots might be understood in relation to the legacy of anti-theatricalism born of the Scottish Reformation during the sixteenth. While historians such as Ian Brown have worked to correct the misperception that theatre in Scotland was simply “stamped out” during the Reformation period, the Church of Scotland’s hostility toward theatre would nonetheless persist through the c18th and c19th centuries, shaping public attitudes into the c20th and constraining both the form and content of theatre and performance practice. For example, Roger Davidson and Gayle Davis’s history of sexuality and Scottish governance notes how concerns voiced by Scottish churches during the 1960s toward work judged decadent, sexually explicit or morally subversive was reflected in a “growing reluctance to house innovative and experimental productions in church premises, such as the Assembly Halls in Edinburgh, especially during the [Fringe] Festival.”²⁸

Given live art and performance art’s recurrent interest in the explicit body, we might pay particular attention to Davidson and Davis’ analysis of how proposals to reform the system of compulsory stage censorship first introduced to Britain in 1843 faced opposition from Scottish authorities (who had initially failed to be consulted on the particularities of Scottish law, and noted the exclusion of Scotland from the 1959 and 1964 Obscene Publications Acts on which the courts in England were intended to rely upon in regulating the stage in future). Despite attempts to clarify and centralise a new process of theatre censorship, “local powers relating to indecency and obscenity [...] continued to be invoked by Scottish civic authorities

²⁸ Roger Davidson and Gayle Davis, *The Sexual State Sexuality and Scottish Governance, 1950-80* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 241.

in an effort to regulate the moral content of performances.”²⁹ In 1970, an all-male production of Hamlet at the Citizen’s Theatre led by its artistic director Giles Havergal would become the lightning rod for debates about taste and morality in Scottish culture, and Scottish theatre in particular – not only because it “ruthlessly cut (and minced and shredded)” the play’s original text but because it opened with the scene of a couple having sex: a couple who turned out to be men.³⁰ Though the production was far less explicit than its critics in the Scottish press would make out, the production nonetheless radiated “a sense of sexual and political danger” in which the production’s experimentation with sexuality represented “a calculated attempt on Scottish Calvinism and the spirit of [Presbyterian theologian] John Knox.”³¹

The Traverse, too, would become a focus for “fantasies and fears about the new ‘permissive’ age” when an earlier student company called Edinburgh Experimental Theatre staged a work in 1968 titled *Mass in F* “in which a young girl sat on stage stripped to the waist and recounted her sexual history”.³² The immediate condemnation of the work by University, civic and local religious authorities had been primed only a few years earlier by the events of the last day of the International Drama Conference in 1963. Angela Bartie’s history of the Edinburgh festivals notes that the first few days of the conference had repeatedly turned to questions of freedom and moral censorship. However, it was during the final day’s “avant-garde demonstrations concerning the future of the theatre” that the issue of public morality took live form when a nude art model appeared briefly as part of a happening organised by the young American director Kenneth Dewey, Edinburgh-born artist Joan Hills and her

²⁹ Davidson and Davis, 245.

³⁰ Michael Coveney, *The Citz: A History of the Citizens Theatre* (London: Nick Hern, 1990), 40.

³¹ Coveney, 42, 45.

³² Joyce McMillan, *The Traverse Theatre Story 1963-88* (London: Methuen Drama, 1988), 40.

husband, Glasgow-born artist Mark Boyle.³³ Positioned on the organ gallery that ran behind where the conference delegates were seated and thus unseen by most of the gathering, the incident was reported in lurid detail as a scandal in the Scottish press, resulting in a highly-publicised trial and the condemnation of the entire event for blasphemousness by the Church of Scotland's Edinburgh Presbytery.³⁴

While Havergal's *Hamlet* and Edinburgh Experimental Theatre's *Mass in F* attracted the heightened attention of the Scottish press and civic authorities because of their (real and imagined) sexual content, the pre-history of the International Drama Conference happening might prompt particular recognition of how at least part of the backlash was related to their non-literary dramaturgies: specifically, how each of the works deployed "real", live and thus explicit bodies in creation of encounters that rejected or adopted only the veneer of naturalism's illusionistic logics. This was theatre doing the very thing that demanded its regulation – that is, not simply simulating obscenity likely to cause moral depravity but manifesting it. Here, Joyce McMillan's history of the Traverse theatre suggests the contemporaneous influence of visiting productions from groups such as New York's La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club whose work "based as much on music, movement, mime, atmosphere and image as on the spoken word, conceived as 'happenings' rather than plays".³⁵ Such work was significant for associate director Max Stafford-Clark because it marked a period of revolution "not so much in content, as in form".³⁶

Scottish Exceptionalism and the Conditions of Creative Risk

³³ John Calder quoted in Angela Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals: Culture and Society in Post-War Britain, The Edinburgh Festivals: Culture and Society in Post-War Britain*, 2012, 124.

³⁴ See Bartie, 126–28.

³⁵ McMillan, *The Traverse Theatre Story 1963-88*, 45.

³⁶ Max Stafford-Clark quoted in McMillan, 45.

I offer the brief historical contexts above as means of trying to locate both the historical conditions of possibility for the emergence of knowledge about live art and identify the ways in which very particular narratives and anxieties might operate to shape the field and its continued development. This is to adopt a historiographical methodology which understands how popular (or at least frequently repeated) narratives surrounding experimental performance work might circulate in relation to other equally selective and influential stories about Scottish culture, and stories about Scottish cultural innovation and creative risk through performance in particular. The most widely trafficked of these stories concerns the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, founded in 1947 as an alternative to the Edinburgh International Festival's tightly curated programme of high culture: opera, classical music, ballet and dramatic theatre. The Fringe broke from this model because it had no jury or artistic director: companies and artists turned up without invitation to put on their work, freed from the strictures of conventional drama, single art-form practices or the controlling hand of a festival curator. While the Fringe has marketed itself a spontaneous and even radical cultural space for work that goes "against the norm", it has nonetheless become a heavily commercialised event as the world's largest arts festival. Anyone can take part providing they can afford to take part by paying the cost of hiring a venue and for startling expensive accommodation during the festival month of August.³⁷ The economic and professional pressures of the Fringe as a showcase for new work means that the festival is a difficult, complex space for risk and formal experimentation – not least because it is dominated by a box office model in which shows are typically allocated hour-long slots, programmed back-to-back and simultaneously. Moreover, the material and economic conditions that have increasingly constrained the

³⁷ See discussion in Stephen Greer, *Queer Exceptions: Solo Performance in Neoliberal Times* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 40–48.

possibility of creative risk have been fetishized in the construction of the artist as an entrepreneur, or as what Jen Harvie explores as the “artrepeneur.”³⁸ This framing of artistic labour and (self) exploitation has had the effect of concealing the often deeply precarious circumstances in which experimental performance has been able to appear at the Fringe, often only through the determined efforts of performance curators in creating spaces of temporary resistance within the Fringe’s dominant commercial model.

The exceptional nature of such work – neither fully included or wholly excluded from the marketplace of the Fringe – may reveal the assumptions on which the larger operation of cultural production depends and seeks to naturalise as inevitable rather than the outcome of specific economic and curatorial models. Here, too, narrative may be revelatory. One of the longest running independent proponents of live art at the Fringe – an organisation called Forest Fringe – programmed a decade of experimental work in spaces across the city before deciding in 2015 to refocus their energies on projects beyond the festival. Founded by Deborah Pearson, Forest Fringe’s curatorial practice in Edinburgh was heavily influenced by the values and practices of the Forest Café, a charity and arts organisation who first approached Pearson to programme their space as a venue that would provide space for non-commercial work, charging neither artists to perform in the space nor audiences for tickets, and sustaining its activities through volunteer labour. From its earliest years, this would include durational and one-to-one performances typically judged incompatible with Fringe programming logics and, not incidentally, performance forms central to the development of live art in the UK from the 1990s onwards. Andy Field – who joined Pearson as Forest Fringe’s co-director in its second year – has suggested the influence on his practice of Aurora Nova, a venue run by a Berlin-based company of the same name which programmed visual

³⁸ Jen Harvie, *Fair Play — Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013).

and physical theatre by primarily European artists, initially working on a profit-share model but closing after the 2007 festival to return as a production house supporting artists to present work in Edinburgh, and no longer programming their own space. Paradoxically, the work of both Aurora Nova and Forest Fringe was celebrated in the UK arts press because it was seen as breaking away from the norms of a Fringe increasingly dominated by straight theatre and stand-up comedy, even as that festival was itself still being marked as “against the norm”, and even as the conditions of that festival would ultimately lead both groups to invest their energies elsewhere.

One of the ways we might interrogate the Fringe’s narrative of exceptionality is by placing the festival’s self-congratulatory and often ahistorical affirmation of its conditions in conversation with the mythos of “the Glasgow miracle”, a phrase first used in the mid-1990s by the Swiss curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist in reference to the emergence of a strong visual arts community in the city. The term “miracle” has proven contentious, with some commentators questioning how it might imply a one-off event describing the outcome of arbitrary forces rather than the result of skill and conscious effort. Sarah Lowndes’ history of Glasgow’s art scene suggests how that community was the result of a predominantly self-organised and autonomous arts infrastructure,³⁹ while curatorial duo Mother Tongue have drawn critical attention to absence of the work of contemporaries Maud Sulter and Oladélé Ajiboyé Bamgboyé from the Glasgow miracle narrative, exploring “the relationship between this omission and the whiteness of the known narratives surrounding art histories of Glasgow, and more broadly, Scotland.”⁴⁰ The disbelief that Glasgow should prove capable of producing a number of highly successful and acclaimed artists including Turner prize winners Douglas

³⁹ See Sarah Lowndes, *Social Sculpture: The Rise of the Glasgow Art Scene* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ Mother Tongue, “What We Have Done, What We Are About To Do,” 2012, <https://mothertonguecurating.com/projects/#/what-we-have-done-what-we-are-about-to-do>.

Gordon, Martin Boyce and Susan Philips is also bound up in the larger cultural history of Glasgow as an economically and socially-troubled post-industrial city, seen in contrast to the high cultural spires of Edinburgh as an “Athens of the north”. From the early eighties onwards, Glasgow had embarked on a series of campaigns to cast off its reputation as a “mean city” riven with severe socio-economic problems and reposition itself as a welcoming tourist destination. This effort included the *Miles Better* publicity campaign, hosting the national Glasgow Garden Festival and a successful bid to become European City of Culture in 1990.

One of the legacies of these projects was the creation of a physical and curatorial infrastructure that would foster the development of new and experimental performance over the following decade, whether in commissioning Scottish artists to make new work or in programming performance by established international artists, and perhaps most notably by establishing Tramway on Glasgow’s southside which remains a major performance and visual arts venue. However, while Glasgow’s post-industrial transformation has frequently been examined as an example of successful culture-led regeneration, Claire Edwards makes the case for how the absence of any joined-up cultural policy and the predominance of economic development priorities means that Glasgow’s transformation might be better understood as a mode of “regeneration-led culture.”⁴¹ Moreover, Gordon has suggested that Obrist’s comments were not intended to communicate disbelief that Glasgow could be a home for contemporary art but were instead a response to the apparent generosity of the artists involved in the city’s visual art scene at that particular moment. That is, Obrist was commenting on those artists’ willingness to make space for and promote each other’s work to

⁴¹ Clare Edwards, “Regeneration-Led Culture: Cultural Policy in Glasgow 1970-1989” (University of Glasgow, 2018), <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/71938/1/2018edwardsphd.pdf>.

outsiders in a manner that contradicted the individualistic competitiveness of the contemporary art market. In Gordon's words, "Everyone spoke about someone else. They never spoke about themselves".⁴²

This affirmation of critical generosity can be located in turn to what Dan Brown, Deborah Jackson and Neil Mulholland have explored as a tradition of Scottish artist-run initiatives – that is, independent galleries which are curated and administered by a volunteer committee of artists, elected by their peers and serving for a fixed term of years before stepping down to allow for new leadership to take its place.⁴³ Originating at the New 57 Gallery, Edinburgh, this structure was adopted and developed by number of highly influential artist-led spaces across Scotland that include Transmission (Glasgow, founded 1983), Collective (Edinburgh, 1984), Generator (Dundee, 1997) and Embassy (Edinburgh, 2004). While focused primarily on visual arts, these gallery spaces have frequently supported interdisciplinary artists working with performance and liveness as a part of their practice, whether in the form of live events, installation or digital media. However, their committee mode has come under increasing scrutiny in the context of British austerity post 2007/8, not least because the conditions of relative economic stability and structures of social welfare which enabled UK artists to work for free while developing their practice during the 1980s and early 1990s largely no longer exist. These changed conditions have had uneven consequences. As interdisciplinary artist and former Transmission committee member Alberta Whittle notes, the "structure of no pay was constituted in an era when artists could survive more comfortably without financial remuneration. However, these conditions nurture destructive working practices for those who cannot afford to labour for free, contributing further to the erasure and invisibility of Back,

⁴² Douglas Gordon and Ross Sinclair, "Interview: Douglas Gordon," *The Glasgow Miracle: Materials for Alternative Histories*, 2013, <https://www.glasgowmiraclearchives.org/interview/douglas-gordon/>.

⁴³ Dan Brown, Deborah Jackson, and Neil Mulholland, "Artists Running: Fifty Years of Scottish Cultural Devolution," *Visual Culture in Britain* 19, no. 2 (2018): 139–67.

POC, QTIPoC artists, curators and artist-curators”.⁴⁴ In this context, Transmission has sought to re-examine one of the inherent contradictions in its practice: a commitment to the idea that each and every person that it works with should receive fair pay, and the principle that the gallery is managed and programmed by a voluntary committee who are not paid for their labour.

The volunteer-collective model – and the narratives which surround it – may therefore offer a powerful perspective from which to historicise the Fringe’s own reliance on unpaid or underpaid labour in enabling possibilities for performance art and experimental performance. It provides a standpoint for politicising the persistence and disappearance of live art and performance art in Scotland’s cultural history, and the role such work is made to play in confirming or disputing the broader terms on which creative experiment and risk is imaginable, and thus possible. Singular narratives about the Edinburgh Fringe and the Glasgow miracle – and other parts of the Scottish cultural landscape – are significant for what they might push forward and naturalise as the preconditions of practice and knowledge about performance art and live art. They are consequential because of the social, economic and curatorial structures they serve to elevate or conceal, and thus the necessary focus of examination and critique for how they might shape our understanding of the sector’s possible futures.

My intention in surfacing these narratives and their contexts (and placing them in critical conversation) is not to arrive at a singular story of live art in Scotland but to work towards a historiography which can sustain multiple, incomplete and sometimes contradictory accounts,

⁴⁴ Alberta Whittle, “Biting the Hand That Feeds You: A Strategy of Wayward Curating,” *Critical Arts* 33, no. 6 (2019): 120.

in part by examining the existing, dominant narratives concerning Scotland's performance culture – stories which work to naturalise (and thus make invisible) the conditions in which live art or performance art is made to 'appear' from a place of presumptive absence. Doing so seems not only necessary to avoiding a canonical history which is blind to its own patterns of inclusion and exclusion, but pertinent to an examination of the paradoxical conditions of contemporary neoliberalism in which risk is demanded but something which must be carefully managed if not guarded against. As I have suggested above, it involves a form of historiography which considers the materiality of its sources – whether in the form of fragmentary archives or subjective memories – as expressive of historical conditions and, at the same time, informing the conditions through which any history might be constructed. In that context, my role as a performance historian is not simply or even primarily corrective, working to redress gaps in existing histories of theatre and performance in Scotland, but oriented on an understanding of omission or partiality as evidencing a particular set of conditions that extend into the present. Reflecting on how the 'unruly' nature of live art may frustrate conventional historiographies, Deirdre Heddon suggests that "the production of history, taking place in history, is marked by the concerns of its own moment of production."⁴⁵ That "moment" does not stand at distance from the materials on which a history might draw but is constituted in dialogical relation to them: in simplest terms, the past remains present.

⁴⁵ Heddon, 10.