



Live Art UK *Listen*

Episode 2: Live Art in Yorkshire

Participants:

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MV: The infrastructure for Live Art in the UK is based in community. This can mean many different things, from the global networks of artists, producers and researchers who make digital connections across the world, to the temporary families that are formed at performance festivals for a few days at a time, to the support and resource-sharing which happens year-round in the towns and cities where artists live and work.

In this podcast, the second from the Live Art UK network of venues and promoters, we look at the Live Art community in Yorkshire. The UK's largest county, Yorkshire contains areas of dense urban population within picturesque countryside, and we'll be hearing how its histories of industry and tourism have left behind spaces and opportunities for today's artists.

TO: When we arrived in Sheffield, we didn't really know the city and we didn't know anybody in it.

MV: That's Terry O'Connor, from Forced Entertainment, a ground-breaking company of artists who have been based out of Sheffield since 1984.

TO: The first few years at least, maybe longer, were a process, in Forced Entertainment, of the work reflecting our kind of organic exploration of the city and what it was like to live in and a sense of its history and its potential. One of the things that we found, of course, in the mid-80s, was a number of kind of empty buildings, industrial buildings, factories and warehouses, small spaces... and we were part of a

larger community of artists who were sort of working in those spaces: musicians, filmmakers, people working across different artforms. But for us, it enabled us to think that we could make, and it gave us a community of other makers which, in a way, encouraged us to think about theatre and performance as something in connection with music and in connection with other art forms.

My sense now, in Sheffield, is that most emerging or independent performance makers have some kind of connection with Theatre Delicatessen, which is really providing a kind of focus for making in the city. They are a London organisation that came up to Sheffield and took over an old Woolworth's building – a massive building right in the city centre – and they facilitate work by commissioning, by mentoring, providing rehearsal space and performance space and there's a café there, and I think this has really done an enormous amount to help create a sense of community for people interested in making performance in Sheffield.

MV: You'll hear a lot about space over the next 15 minutes or so. While Live Art has never been shackled to traditional performance buildings, and indeed, much of the work made in this sector comes alive in public space or in a moment of unexpected encounter, artists need affordable places to live, make, rehearse, and, as Terry says, to find one another and generate a culture of creativity. When Forced Entertainment first arrived in Sheffield, they found that in a former flour mill on the south-east edge of the city centre.

TO: The venue in Sheffield, the Leadmill, was also really important in encouraging this sense of exchange and of community between performance work and art, film and music.

JS: I do think a lot of it has to do with buildings and places and things like that. Like, there's the availability here that there isn't in a lot of other cities and that's something that's very very clear every time someone, particularly London-based people come up, they're like 'wow', 'cause I don't know if you've noticed but this place is massive.

MV: Jess Sweet is one of the artists leading Live Art Bistro, or LAB, in Leeds. They're currently based in an empty retail space just outside the centre, but have occupied a number of different locations since they began in 2012. Here's Adam Young, also from LAB.

AY: For me, it's a story of spaces that we've been given, that have allowed us the opportunity to sort of create a bit of a community in Leeds, which y'know, was already there but it was quite disparate. We all sort of came out of university at the time when the financial crash happened and, y'know, we got 33% cuts in arts funding so places like Annie Lloyd's Studio Gallery Theatre had just closed. So really, there wasn't any sort of first, second rung on the ladder. It looked like the only places to go were London, Bristol, y'know, maybe potentially Manchester; it just didn't look very good for the city. But actually there was a lot of interesting things going on.

MV: Live Art Bistro work largely without funding, volunteering their time and creating partnerships with other organisations in the city to share resources.

AY: To get to where we are now, we've worked voluntary for three years pretty much, and the investment and funding that we've had has been quite piecemeal.

PR: I think we're probably - we run up against the challenge of being seen to be better resourced, and bigger, than we actually are. I mean, we're speaking now at the kind of furthest point from the festival, and that means it's really just Annie and I and a couple of desks and this prefab little office.

MV: That's Peter Reed from Compass Live Art, who work from a small space at LAB. Most of the time, Compass are a two-man band, but every two years their team expands to deliver Compass Festival. Here's Annie Lloyd, who founded the organisation in 2011, and continues to run it with Peter.

AL: It is very hand-to-mouth, because we're not regularly funded, and I think that's right; the perception is that we're greater in resource than we are, but I do think that has something to do with the fact that, certainly come festival time, we do build the team (we've run a Trainee Producers scheme for the last two festivals as well) so the personnel grows, but I think also our output is very ambitious, so we do actually achieve quite a huge amount of work. We did 18 projects in the festival just gone.

MV: The campaign to make Leeds European Capital of Culture in 2023 launched recently, and is in the middle of an extensive public consultation about what that year might include. This isn't dissimilar to the principles on which Annie and Peter have developed Compass, programming work which responds directly to Leeds and its people, and situating it in markets and libraries and shopping centres.

AL: It's a city that... I mean, I've lived in Leeds for nearly 30 years, and it's a city that has continually investigated itself in terms of what its cultural position is. I think often, in the past, it's been perceived as a place that's got a number of high-end institutions, with the ballet and the opera and the [West Yorkshire] Playhouse and so forth, and a sense that 'therefore we're sorted', and then there's been a sort of grassroots, community arts element that's been supported by the city as well, and I think for many years there's been a real shortage of anything in between that, and certainly anything that comes at the world from a different angle.

I mean, the culture of Leeds is shopping; wherever you go, that's what it's known for, even though we have Manchester just over the border. Leeds prides itself on being the place that people come to for shopping and I think, again, the conversation is 'what more is there in our culture than that? Is it all about commercialism and consumerism?' And whatever one thinks about Capitals of Culture – they're very controversial and they're not universally loved – the fact that the city is putting itself in the position of having to think about how it is distinct from every other, so that it isn't just going to produce the kind of normal high street notion of culture, it's got to look at what else is going on. And I think that's a great time for Live Art in particular to step up and go 'if you're looking for distinctive, if you're looking for interactive, if

you're looking for stuff that actually speaks to the contemporary experience, you couldn't do better than Live Art'. So it feels like a really great opportunity at the moment, for us.

MV: In Leeds, both Compass and Live Art Bistro acknowledge how difficult it is for artists and small organisations to survive and make things happen. There is a sense of optimism though, not just because of the Capital of Culture bid, but because the community of artists is growing and making new connections all the time.

AY: I think, for when LAB started out to now, I think it's really encouraging to see how much more profile the city has, and especially the artists within it. When you look at the major festivals and platforms that happen nationally, more and more artists that are based in Leeds are represented at those. When I first graduated I used to go to every single festival I could and quite often I'd be the only person from Leeds there, and now that's not the case. Now we're a bit of a rabble of Leeds people, so I think that's really encouraging and I can only see that trend continuing. And there is a constant stream of really interesting graduates who are sticking around in the city and wanting to make it work and who are really engaged in, especially what we're doing and volunteering at things like Compass, so I think the future is actually really bright for Live Art in Leeds.

MV: Outside of Yorkshire's cities, the arts community is naturally more dispersed, with considerably different resources available. I travelled from Leeds to Scarborough, wondering if I might find an artist community energised by tourism in the area, or heartened by activities in Hull this year, where they are City of Culture for 2017. There I met Jade Montserrat, an artist who grew up in Scarborough and continues to be based there, but she told me that, in reality, the lack of support for cultural initiatives in the town is frustrating. (I should also say here, that Jade and I spoke in the presence of the loudest fridge in Yorkshire – possibly the world – the kind of hum which is entirely invisible when you're there but loud as a jet engine on tape – sorry about that.)

JM: I would like to feel that there is support for cultural initiatives that aren't to do with a homogenised entertainment industry. I'd like that guy from Turner Contemporary [in Margate] to come here and present a model on how you regenerate the town culturally, and to demonstrate to the council how artists, visual artists, and DIY initiatives, support of artists using spaces that aren't occupied (and there are so many spaces that aren't occupied), shops, independent shops or places that have gone bust like Comet, that have been stood there for ages now... So there needs to be a greater support for initiatives for young people.

MV: On the day I met Jade in Scarborough, the local council were voting on the future of an old theatre – The Futurist – which sits right on the seafront. A beautiful old art deco building, it was once a centre for culture in the town (The Beatles played there twice, and Jade saw her first opera there as a child), but it's stood empty since 2014. When we met to chat and walk round the town together, Jade had come directly from protesting against its possible demolition, and as we spoke, news arrived that the council have voted to knock it down by only one vote. This was a big

decision for Scarborough – a genuine talking point for local people. In a chippy on the seafront, a hundred metres or so from the theatre, we heard accusations of corruption in local government, but also got a sense that many people would be happy to see it go, instead replaced with an attraction which would be more popular with tourists. But for Jade, and I expect many other artists and residents, the news of the vote was pretty heartbreaking.

JM: It's a symbol of hope for the town, so if that was brought back to life, it represents... it represents goodwill, and it represents a reemergence of our identity, and cherishing our identity.

MV: Jade speaks highly of the work done by other local organisations, such as Crescent Arts, but their resources are limited. So I asked her what might proactively help artists based in Scarborough, and similar towns across the UK.

JM: It's going to be really helpful, if I get a residency, to go away and that will give me the headspace because at the moment, and for the past three years, I've been working from my bedroom, and I have to have a routine so I make sure I'm up for 7 every morning and I go for a walk, and until October of last year I was walking three miles a day, but creating a performance on that walk, and then I'd get to work and I would work until I went to sleep. And at the moment – because I've moved – I'm trying to find what that new routine is, but routine is crucial for me. And in terms of performance, to have focus, and to have clarity, and to have quiet, none of those aspects can be absent from making, or else it just doesn't ... I can't make. Like anyone who is working seriously at any profession, you need to be in the right environment.

MV: We hear so much about the impact of art and artists on our economy and quality of life – ever since New Labour arrived in the mid-90s, that has remained the dominant narrative – and while that instrumentalist perspective is not without its problems, artists' ability to articulate a sense of place – the identity of a city or town or region – has huge benefits for all residents. What is evident from these conversations though, from speaking to Terry, to Jess and Adam, to Annie and Peter, and to Jade, is that artists cannot work without support. As the industrial buildings which Forced Entertainment used in the 80s are redeveloped, artists make use of empty shops and public space, but that is often only possible through generosity and mutual support. To give artists space is to give them a place to gather, to make work and to make connections, but it is also to show them they are valued. While money is a struggle for Compass and LAB, as it was in the early days of Forced Entertainment, these organisations have a sense of local community, of shared ethos and self-worth which comes from having a home in their city, a space to meet and play. It is that which seems to be missing for Jade in Scarborough, and why the loss of The Futurist feels so demoralising.

JM: If someone wants to embrace me as a Scarboroughian, or a Yorkshireperson, then that's great, but that hasn't happened to me in either my personal life or my professional life so I'm reluctant to say I'm doing anything specifically for

Scarborough or Yorkshire, because as far as I'm concerned, it's still got to prove itself to me, that it's worth me saying that.

Thank you to Annie Lloyd, Jade Montserrat, Terry O'Connor, Peter Reed, Jess Sweet and Adam Young. My name is Megan Vaughan, and I work for the Live Art Development Agency, one of 28 organisations which make up Live Art UK – working to present, profile and support Live Art across the country. Go to liveartuk.org to learn more.