



# Live Art UK *Listen*

## Episode 1: On festivals

Rosana Cade, Artist and Co-Founder, Buzzcut (RC)

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Brian Lobel, Artist and Director, The Sick of The Fringe (BL)

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MV: Every August, the city of Edinburgh is taken over by thousands of artists and performers, each hoping to carve themselves a little bit of space within the festival behemoth that is the Edinburgh Fringe. It's a tough slog for anyone: it's gruelling, it's expensive, and it can seem like the only thing that matters is the number of 5-star reviews stapled across your posters. For artists working in Live Art, it can be even more inhospitable. Live Art defies the easy categorisation of the Fringe brochure. A performance might be a fleeting encounter, or it might last for days. Artists might be using their bodies in extreme or unusual ways, pushing at the boundaries of established practices and artforms. Showcasing Live Art within the relentless competition of Edinburgh can be a huge challenge.

One organisation which has risen to the challenge is Forest Fringe, run by artists and co-directors Andy Field, Deborah Pearson and Ira Brand, and this year celebrating their tenth year of presenting Live Art and alternative performance practices in Edinburgh. Here's Andy.

AF: Edinburgh presents itself as a sort of open, free, democratic festival, but it's a very neoliberal version of democracy and freedom, in which the conditions of participation are entirely set by a small group of venues who demand that you have a certain amount of money to be able to participate – it's very, very expensive – and they're able to set the artistic conditions as well: most of the work takes place in black boxes, you have to run for three whole weeks, which precludes a lot of the most interesting work that happens.

Our collective presence in Edinburgh continues to be, to a degree, a political act. It's something that we all continue to do even though a lot of the artists we work with, whether it be Tim Etchells or Action Hero or Brian Lobel, are artists who probably don't need to be in Edinburgh anymore, but continue to choose to do so, and continue to choose to do so with us, with Forest Fringe, because it feels important that we are making a space within the world's busiest arts festival to proclaim an alternative way of working, alternative forms of performance, and alternative aesthetic and political ideas.

MV: Here's Brian Lobel, director of *The Sick of the Fringe*, and one of this year's Forest Fringe artists, who has made a series of intimate and provocative works about his body and his experience of cancer.

BL: It's hard to sell your work about your body, especially when it's not a body that people privilege or celebrate. So me having a body that was about cancer and awkward sexuality and difficulty and infertility and things like that made people uncomfortable and made it hard to market the work, makes it hard to think about the work, and people are so often told to stop talking about it. Maybe you do get one show about cancer or one show about your trauma, but then... *'shut up about it'*, which is really a way of saying they shouldn't have made it in the first place. What I want is more shows, more ideas, more nuance to these narratives.

MV: My name is Megan Vaughan and I work for the Live Art Development Agency. We're one of 27 organisations that make up Live Art UK: a network of venues, festivals and producers working locally and nationally to promote Live Art practices and share the work of the incredible, groundbreaking artists working in this field. In this podcast, we're going to be sharing some thoughts and experiences on Live Art festivals: their history, their economics, and their culture of community. Here's Aaron Wright, Artistic Director of *Fierce*, a Live Art festival in Birmingham, and also a member of the Steakhouse Collective.

AW: So I *love* festivals. I've always gone to festivals. Initially as a 15 year old, going and rioting at Reading Festival every year and then growing up a little bit and being now a Glastonbury veteran. I'm really interested in those temporary environments that are created. Then obviously I started going to arts festivals and I think arts festivals are obviously different to music festivals in that they're, y'know, you're not stuck in a field for a week, but the potential for dialogue at them is much richer.

Something strange happens in these temporary spaces. They become sort of... visions of utopia, much like nightclubs. Nightclubs are these temporary environments that last for a night. Dancefloors are inherently utopian places and I think that's fascinating. I think they offer an insight into a better world and offer us potential for how we could be living. And also I just think now more than ever it's important that people actually congregate in physical, public space.

MV: There are loads of festivals in the calendar now, but it wasn't always that way. Here's Lois Keidan, co-director of the Live Art Development Agency.

LK: Well I've been working in Live Art longer than many Live Art practitioners have been alive so it gives me a particular vantage point to look at the evolution of Live Art and festivals. For many years, the only sort of Live Art festivals as such were the National Review of Live Art which was started in Nottingham then was itinerant for a couple of years, in London, then it relocated to Glasgow, firstly within the Third Eye Centre and then within CCA, as the Third Eye Centre turned into, and then it went peripatetic again and was at The Arches and at Tramway. In each of those incarnations the festival sort of took a different shape but many of its core characteristics were still in place. It offered a context for audiences to see emergent artists and it offered a context for emergent artists to introduce their work to the world, it offered a context for commissioned work – for new work to be created specifically for the National Review of Live Art which would then go on to have a longer life – and it was also a context for international and UK artists to present existing pieces of work. And it was a really important festival partly because it was the *only* festival, but also because it did do this strange mix of encouraging intergenerational dialogues and collaborations, a chance to see the work of mature artists and, more importantly, a chance to see the work of the artists of tomorrow, today, through the platform.

The only other festival that was really happening that was dedicated to Live Art was a festival also starting in Nottingham called Contemporary Archives, that then morphed into the Now Festival, and by the time the Now Festival ceased to be, and I can't remember the exact dates of that, but by the time that festival ceased to be, many more festivals had begun to emerge. Dedicated Live Art festivals, some that were part of venue programming, that then went on to have a life of their own, like In Between Time, which was part of the Arnolfini's programme and then became an independent festival, but also other initiatives, such as Wunderbar in Newcastle, Fierce Festival obviously started in the 1990s in the West Midlands, in Birmingham. So, since the early days of the National Review, more and more dedicated Live Art festivals have emerged.

MV: And live artists are now finding opportunities in larger and broader festivals too.

LK: So at the same time as all of these different Live Art festivals have evolved, there's also been an embrace of Live Art practices within other festival contexts. LIFT, for example, in London, has always operated sort of at the edges of Live Art. It's always supported Live Art activities within the wider framework of a festival of international experimental theatre works, but then other festivals such as Norfolk and Norwich, such as Manchester International Festival, have all sort of recognised the way that Live Art practices can contribute to a festival menu, and to different forms of audience engagement.

AW: I sort of see Fierce almost as a festival of counterculture in many respects. I think at the heart of Fierce is this core enquiry into pop culture, and how the underground rubs up against the mainstream. I really encourage a much more cross-disciplinary approach. I'm not so bothered what it's called. I think it's useful to have terminologies and categories for funding reasons and for strategic reasons but particularly in how I plan to programme Fierce, I think you'll be seeing things that

might look like a gig in there, that might look like a film in there, that might look like a piece of theatre, that might look like performance art, that might just look like something really bloody weird on your local high street.

MV: As well as being a natural home for experimental performance artists, Live Art festivals have an excellent tradition of showcasing artists who may be overlooked because they don't conform to assumptions about who artists are or what they look like. Here's Clive Lyttle, director of Certain Blacks festival.

CL: Certain Blacks comes with a tagline: we do what we want to. And we want to break the view that diverse organisations should just present, should just be presenting, one sort of work or heritage work. We want to present cutting edge work really. It started because I felt a need to present diverse art work, and when I say diverse, I mean diverse in its broadest sense. My background as a black person, I support a lot of artists from different backgrounds and different ranges, but I also wanted to do an organisation which wasn't typecast, which wasn't put into one particular box. We'll present everything. We've done music, we've done VJs, cut-up stuff, we've got a big interest in presenting Live Art, and theatre as well. There was a real demand for it. There was a real demand for the diverse work. I mean, Lady Vendredi is... you can see her as a sort of performance artist, you could see her as a musician, you could see it as immersive theatre. It's very much Live Art from a different angle. What I would like to see in the future is for there to be more diverse live artists out there. Live Art comes with its inherent diversity. Definitely, there is a lot of LGBT artists – there's a big range of different artists – but I still think there is a space for the support and development of artists from more diverse BAME backgrounds.

MV: Festivals are a hugely important playground for artists at the early stages of their career, or who are just looking for an opportunity to try out ideas in a supportive, creative environment.

CL: One of the things that we did with this festival was... it wasn't just presenting the work, but it was enabling the artists to rework the work for the spaces, so we supported the rehearsal period of a couple of the shows. I think it's very important for festivals not just to programme work in, but to support the development of that work so it can be seen in its best context.

MV: Here's Rosana Cade. Along with Nick Anderson, she founded the artist-led Buzzcut festival in Glasgow.

RC: Even though Buzzcut now has quite a high profile, when it started, obviously it didn't, and a lot of people saw it as a place where they could try something out, and I think that's really important for artists to have that space, and so we try to maintain that by programming stuff that isn't finished, artists who are taking a risk, and because it's such a big programme – we have about 60 performance across 5 days, and all the audiences are paying what they can, they're choosing how much they want to pay for their ticket – I think that creates a real atmosphere of generosity amongst the people that are there.

MV: Buzzcut are one of the newest Live Art festivals around. When they started, they were responding to a direct need from the artistic community in Glasgow.

RC: At the time that we'd graduated, the National Review of Live Art had finished and that had been going for 30 years, and that had been something we'd really loved going to when we were students and it felt like there were a few other festivals that were disappearing from the scene in Glasgow. I think a lot of people in the community were feeling this loss and yeah, asking what might happen next. I suppose we were both quite young, and didn't have loads of other stuff that we were doing so we, one morning, just thought 'oh, why don't we try and put on a festival?' We have an open application process so we see it as sort of a collaboration between us and the artists that want to come. We're saying 'this is what we can offer' and you offer this and we'd not, like, buying anyone's work or anything like that, and we'd never... I don't think we'd ever be picking work from stuff we'd seen; it's always about the artist saying 'oh, I want to come and be involved in Buzzcut'.

MV: Live Art festivals are funded in many different ways, but whatever the budget, festival organisers have to make limited cash go a long way. Festivals like Forest Fringe and Buzzcut use a pay-what-you-can model, removing as many barriers to accessing the work as they can. This means that the offer that they make to artists also has to be about more than just money.

AF: None of the artists that I know are making art because they think it's a sort of... the most stable and reliable way in which they could earn an income. In fact, quite the opposite in most cases. And so you've got a number of other priorities for what you want. You want, kind of, pastoral care, community, a sense of a space of radical possibility, a kind of... a place in which you can gather and be together and feel like you're doing something collectively about the awfulness of the world, and that is... I think that understanding that, or having perhaps a first-hand understanding of what we really love and really value in the places that we go to as artists helps us to shape Forest Fringe in that way, to really emphasise the care that we try and give to artists, the sense of community that we try and nourish.

RC: In order to pay everyone how we'd want to pay them, with the scale of the festival that we do, we'd need maybe like a million pounds, and I don't think that's an exaggeration. At that first time we were responding to our artistic community and wanting to do something for them, through our own experiences of being artists and what it was like for us when we went to other festivals. So because we didn't have any money we straight away forced to think about what else is of value. If you can't offer people money, what can you offer them? I think that question has stuck as part of our practice. Whilst I do really think that artists should be paid, I also think that money isn't the only thing of value you can get from a festival.

AF: Powerlessness is something that I think artists feel quite regularly, for a variety of reasons, in numerous and many different venues that they go to, and although I'm not suggesting that there is sort of total egalitarianism at Forest Fringe – far from it – actually, the fact that we not only are artists but the fact that we also present our

work at that venue, I think hopefully creates a... does something to undermine the kind of power imbalance in any kind of programmer-producer-artist relationship. It doesn't matter how badly you think your show went, you know that you can come and see my show the next day and it will probably go equally badly and we'll all end up feeling much more on a kind of equilibrium.

MV: While Forest Fringe takes place in one venue – the Out of the Blue Drill Hall in Leith – The Sick of the Fringe supports artists in Edinburgh by navigating the wider festival programme, making connections between performance works taking place all over the city, and starting a wider conversation.

BL: We started Sick of the Fringe last year, in Edinburgh, to try to chart and to promote some of the best work that's happening around health and illness and disability at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It was my opinion... I'd been up in Edinburgh for the last 8 years and I think it's a great place for people to talk about their work, but it's not a great place for people to listen to other people's ideas. When you walk down the Royal Mile you hear 'come see my show', 'come see my show', 'come see my show', 'come see my show', and I was frustrated that there was very little sharing, very little back-and-forth, very little considering of other people. And I thought this was particularly difficult for people who are doing work on the very fragile subject of the body, people's personal traumas or their personal illness, or their narrative dealing with disability and health. And so, what we wanted to do was try to change the narrative, try to change the energy from one that is competitive to one that is collaborative, and one where ideas can be shared. So this was the first, initial impulse of The Sick of The Fringe. The other major impulse that we had with The Sick of The Fringe was to try to make the work that happened in Edinburgh in the month of August, potentially under a staircase or upstairs in a pub, to be relevant and to continue beyond August. While there are many people who go to Edinburgh for professional advantage, to book a tour etc, a lot of those pieces don't exist, but unfortunately, I think the great tragedy is that we lose the ideas that people have brought with them, and it doesn't mean that every show is great at the fringe and deserves a tour, but it means that the dedication and the time and the thinking that people have done deserve to be seen beyond the singular audience or beyond that singular venue. The Sick of The Fringe came from a very natural, natural artistic place for me, which was that I experienced difficulty talking about my body to venues, to audiences etc, and I think I've broken through a little bit about that, but I want to create a bigger community, a broader community, a more inclusive, accessible community that will increase the amount of narratives that society is hearing, and then make those narratives *better*.

RC: In our third festival we moved to the Pearce Institute in Govan which is a building that's been a community centre for over a hundred years, this beautiful big building. It felt right to be there for lots of reasons, partly because it is a community centre and I think, sort of, that's quite symbolic in terms of what we want to think about. Buzzcut is about community, it's about communal action. Being there, and in Govan, we of course didn't want to feel like we were just coming in and doing this festival and then leaving and so across the few years that we've been there we've had different projects that have run in the area and we've just tried to meet as many

people as we can. I think it really is like a long-term community project if you want to call it that but really what's important to us is just that people know that they're invited to come, and I suppose we see our practice of making a festival as a way of sort of exploring and embodying our ethics. If we were going to create a society, what would it be? What would the rules be? We try and put that into the festival.

MV: So you see, the changes that Live Art festivals have undergone in the last ten years, within and beyond Edinburgh, have been significant.

AF: The nature of something like Edinburgh I think is that it kind of forms and reforms itself with each subsequent generation and hopefully there will be new, interesting things that come along soon and will again shift the way that the festival operates.

MV: And beyond Edinburgh, Live Art festivals continue to evolve and flourish across the UK. From Compass in Leeds to Hazard in Manchester, Experimentica in Cardiff, Tempting Failure in Bristol and London, Sick in Manchester and Brighton, a huge breadth of Live Art practices are presented. In Between Time in Bristol and Spill in Ipswich programme world-renowned artists alongside extensive showcases of younger and early-career artists, who benefit from the professional mentoring and exposure that the festival environment creates. Subsequently, the future of Live Art will continue to thrive in these temporary, utopian spaces.

MV: Thank you to Rosana Cade, Andy Field, Lois Keidan, Brian Lobel, Clive Lyttle and Aaron Wright. This has been a podcast from Live Art UK, the national network of Live Art promoters. To find out more about us and our members, visit [liveartuk.org](http://liveartuk.org).