

Live Art in Scotland: Ashanti Harris

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Stephen Greer (SG): I think I read something that said you were a sculptor by training and a performer by practice. Is that a good place to start?

Ashanti Harris (AH): Yes. Do you want to hear about that transition?

SG: Yes, that would be great!

AH: I moved to Glasgow to study sculpture. I kind of come from a visual art background and I'd done a foundation in Fine Art in Leeds before I moved to Glasgow. The course I was going to study on is called Sculpture and Environmental Art and it has a focus on concepts. The kind of separation between how people describe the environmental art side of it and the sculpture side of it was that environmental art was focused on concept, but sculpture was focused on process, and I kind of chose to specialise in sculpture because I love making things and I love the physicality of making things. As I went along with the course, that process, also kind of guided by the course, the process became the thing that I was interested in. I was interested in the relationship between the physicality of making and these sculptural processes with movement and dance and I started to work with sculptural processes as dance or as choreography whilst I was studying. There were quite a few other people studying at the same time as me that were interested in working with bodies and movement. Two people particularly, an artist who now goes by Letitia Pleiades and another artist named Romany Dear, and we kind of came together at the end of graduating to make

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a space for people who were interested in experimenting with movement, and we kind of started G.O.D.S.

SG: So G.O.D.S was Glasgow Open Dance School?

AH: Yes, G.O.D.S stands for Glasgow Open Dance School. We came together as people experimenting with movement while studying visual art. At that time, when we were interested in dance, the dance scene in Glasgow, there was a lot of really exciting experimental things happening, but it was mostly aimed at professional dancers. The invite was for professional dancers only. Feeling like beginners in dance and beginners in movement, we didn't necessarily feel like it was a space we could join, but we were so interested in the really amazing experimental things that were happening. We wanted to create a space that wasn't centred around ability or excellence, it was centred around that experience. So still going back to those ideas we had got from studying sculpture and environmental art and thinking about process, and I guess experience being part of the process. We were listening to who was doing what and who had a movement practice that they wanted to share, but also who had a movement practice that they didn't even consider a movement practice and thinking about how we could support them to turn it into a workshop. It became a bit of a self-sustaining art school kind of thing. So, when we first started, the idea was anyone that wanted to participate could join, anybody that wanted to lead a workshop could lead one, and then as people were attending other people's workshops and they were gaining new experiences of movements and therefore developing their own workshops. It sort of created this almost self-sustaining system of people coming together to experiment on a monthly basis.

SG: There's a real sense of the idea that embodied expertise is not something that's reserved for a particular type of training or background. There's a knowledge of movement and bodies which is common, if not universal?

AH: Yes. We had a tagline that was, everybody's a dancer, and it was kind of based on this idea that there is no expectation, as long as you have a body you can move even in the most unique way, that you are an expert at your own way of moving and there's value in sharing that with other people and there's value in learning other people's unique ways of moving, and adding to your own kind of kinaesthetic portfolio. That was where we were coming from with G.O.D.S.

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SG: I'm conscious that you also did a research degree following your undergraduate study as well, I know that research is a major component of your work as an artist. Was that at GSA as well?

AH: That was at GSA as well. My undergrad was in 2011, and I'd gone back to studying in 2018. I think a lot happened in those years between 2011 and 2018, we'd been doing G.O.D.S for a number of years and it had had lots of different manifestations. I also had a period of time where I was working with another dance company in Glasgow called Indepen-dance who do dance with people who have additional support needs and learnt so much from working with them. When I was working with Indepen-dance that I met up with Mele Broomes who is a Glasgow-based choreographer and Rhea Lewis who is an Edinburgh-based creative producer of dance, and we'd started having conversations about things we thought were missing in the Glasgow/Edinburgh, I guess the Scottish dance scene and what we wanted to do, this project we wanted to make, and we called it Project X because we didn't know what the project was yet, and then [laughs] we decided we liked that name, I think the possibility of 'X' and the relationship to the civil rights movement was really exciting for us. By the time I'd gone to do the research degree I was really deep in Project X, we were doing so much work. Project X particularly platforms dance and performance from the African and Caribbean diaspora in Scotland. I think when we started we were just thinking about these silenced and invisible histories, between us these little individual bits of knowledge we had about dance of African and Caribbean diaspora in Scotland, about how hard it was to find what our unique journeys were and I think when we first started we wanted to create a sort of legacy project. We wanted to create something that was celebrating what was happening now, but also celebrating and what had happened and recognising what had been happening for a long time in Scotland. So when I went to do the research Master's I went really wanting to do that, really kind of in this is what I'm going to be researching. My thesis was dance of the African and Caribbean diaspora in Scotland. I started with a dance company who came to perform in Glasgow and Edinburgh in 1946 and they're also known as the first British black dance company. They're called Les Ballet Nègres. That was what I was doing, but also the uniqueness of this research masters that I'd chosen to do at the art school with a really incredible course leader called Ranjana Thapalyal who really encouraged what she called critical interventions. I guess they were creative

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critical interventions, and it was recognising that everyone on this research degree had a unique background. I was studying with product designers, writers, painters, people from creative backgrounds and she really encouraged everyone to write critically and think critically but also to make critically and to make these creative responses to the things that we were learning about, but also things we weren't learning about. In doing that, I think I went in thinking, I'm going to be an academic researcher and I came out remembering that I'm an artist [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

AH: It was also a nice moment, I'd been so dance focused, and I'd also remembered, I'm an artist with a background as a sculptor, and starting to remember those processes and that way of thinking that's based around materiality and making and starting to find a little bit more of a link between them and adding in this new element which was my research practice. So thinking about how sculptural processes fed into research practice and taking the sort of movement and embodied knowledge that came from that. That's what kind of came out of that.

SG: There's one project of yours that I'm aware of which I guess links directly to that which is *Presenting Les Ballet Nègres* which has the subtitle *A Contiguous Archive*.

AH: Yes.

SG: I want to say that you were working with the work of Roshini Kempadoo, if I've got that name right. I've only ever seen documentation of that online, so maybe you can tell me a bit more about that project because it looks to me like you're working with a live dance practice or a live movement practice and also archival materials or projection of archival materials.

AH: Yes. Doing that particular part of the research project, it was really this embodied experience [laughs]. I can't even remember actually, how did I first find about Les Ballet Nègres? I wrote about this [laughs]. I think actually it was a Guardian article that was titled, 'They were Britain's first black dance company. How come no one's ever heard of them?' and I think that kind of said it all already, it's this sort of invisible dance company. I'd spent some time in the black cultural archives in Brixton that had some more records about the company and there's also part of the black cultural archives in Leeds. There's a documentary

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work made by Stephen Dwoskin about the company and there's also the Dwoskin archive. So I was rooting through all of these resources, and off the top of my head I cannot remember where I saw the list of everywhere they've performed in the UK but Glasgow came up, and as soon as Glasgow came up that was it, I was just on a mission to find a record of what they'd done in Glasgow and I just went to the newspaper archives. They only existed for eight years which made it a little bit easier, but I just kind of arrived, got this stack [laughs] of newspaper archives and just had to start from the beginning!

SG: And just worked your way through?

AH: Work my way through, yes. Just looking for any kind of reference to the dance company, because typing in their name, things weren't coming up. It was this kind of constant flipping of pages, being in this room and this sort of stack that's getting smaller as I'm going through it all. Eventually, I found a record that said that they'd performed in the Theatre Royal and then I'd gone to the Special Collections at Glasgow University and was looking through their theatre archives and found nothing. Then when typing in a really particular name of one of their dances, called Aggrey, I found a copy of the program from their show. It didn't have a date, there were so many things missing from this document, and that moment of being like I found it! I can tell you, Special Collections, this is the day that this happened and filling in all of that information was amazing, but also that really sparked a bit of a research process that I've worked with since then. When you're working with archives that are so limited and they are so hard to find and there's so little information, I guess it's about what you're bringing to the interpretation or how you're speculating on them, how you make this story come to life. I was working with these documents, really looking into every element of them, but I was also having conversations with dancers who'd been working in Scotland, dancers who had worked in the rest of the UK, and with dancers that worked with similar dance styles, or had similar dance experiences and also telling them about Les Ballet Nègres, showing them bits of archival resources that I had and letting that personal knowledge come up. Obviously when you start having conversations with dancers, they're moving and they're teaching you things, and it kind of just went from there. I think I developed my personal understanding and interpretation of this dance company in relation to their importance in this moment when I was starting Project X with my collaborators. I was looking at dance in Scotland now and the

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representation of dance of the African and Caribbean diaspora and I was speaking to people of African and Caribbean heritage working in Scotland now and starting to find links, both physically and also in their stories of dance, to this dance company and starting to create a narrative that was personal as well. With Roshini Kempadoo and her concept of contiguous archives, what I really loved about her theory of the contiguous archive, I think all archives are contiguous, it's about what the audience or the viewer or the reader is bringing to it. It asks you to be active and I think in relation to archiving black histories, you have to be active by nature of what has been archived and what is there. I like this idea of presenting a movement piece that I'd made with a choreographer named Erick Mauricia Valentin alongside a sculptural work I'd been making. It's an African philosophy that's transferred into a Caribbean carnival in sculptural form. So I thought by making these sculptures in this technique that's also giving me another type of embodied knowledge that's feeding into this narrative. Alongside these archival documents, there were these performance lectures I was making, and also with video documents and cutting out particular moves, and putting all of these things together and allowing the reader to bring their own kind of interpretation, their own perspective, because mine is just mine. I'm the curator of these objects in front of you, but I want people to be active in this archive.

SG: Maybe this is jumping around a bit, I'm just thinking there was something you were talking about there that made me think about *Jumbies* possibly because I feel like that has had a few different existences, perhaps the most recent one being the version created for Glasgow International as a 360 video, as a digital work, and as a publication, but am I right in thinking that there were earlier versions of that, I think 2017 or 2018 maybe?

AH: Yes that is the never-ending project! [Laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

AH: There are so many iterations. *Jumbies* actually started from this sculptural process that I was also working with in Les Ballets Nègres. There's always so much bleed between all of the projects that I do! [Laughs]. I think it is just a continuous, it's like a rolling mass that gets bigger and bigger and bigger as it goes along. When I first started making *Jumbies*, it was when I was doing my masters and I was thinking about Yoruba philosophies of self, and how that's been interpreted in Caribbean carnival through these mesh masks and these mesh masks that you see them in Junkanoo, but you also see them in multiple carnival costumes

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from different countries across the Caribbean. I guess this idea of mesh and the divine self. When you are behind the mask, you can see out into the world, you have this powerful position but you are concealed, you're hidden so therefore you can be anything. This kind of power and possibility of the mask. I was working with different ways of making these mesh masks, I was doing lots of hand-based processes, making plaster casts of faces, using this casting form called alginates which is made from seaweed, then making plaster casts and getting these different metals of mesh and pressing them into the details of a face, so it's also like taking a trace. I really liked how that process and exploring this idea of interstices and traces, and this thing that could be pulled out and reshaped and reformed, but having these multiple faces, stories and narratives embedded in it. I was also thinking about that as a haunting. I think I'd first started reading about hauntology then and was collaborating with a textile designer who was studying at the same time as me. She was looking and thinking about really similar things in relation to textiles, and we just started having conversations and working with cloths and movement, thinking about carnival costume, carnival histories, but also thinking about hauntology. We started by playing with materials and movement together.

SG: Is that Zephyr Liddell?

AH: Zephyr Liddell, yes. I think most of the iterations, I mean they sit under different words, but I guess it's a continuous work in progress. We did a performance in The Art School but as part of The Work Room ten years and beyond, ten year birthday evening of performances. We also did our own private sharings in The Art School as an exhibition as well. We did another iteration of it, collaborating with a musician called Paul Shofolahan at Platform as part of their Eastern Promises programme, and then we did some more work with them to turn it into a video work to document it, and then we started working with Patricia Panther, and working towards what was going to be an intimate, interactive performance [laughs] collaborating with a lighting designer and really looking at the physical, material and audio hauntological possibilities.

SG: And that became the 360 video version?

AH: And also multiple versions in between! [laughs]

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SG: Yes, and I just checked to see when my version might arrive, there's a publication which accompanies the video version?

AH: Yes.

SG: It's really interesting the way you're describing all the different contexts in which various articulations of the project have been presented. I suppose I'm curious more broadly about all those different organisations as spaces that might support, or at least offer space, for this kind of inter-disciplinary working. In the case of *G.O.D.S* and Project X that's about you and your collaborators making space, where there wasn't one or wasn't enough of one, but then there's practice in relations to, as you were saying, The Art School and also The Work Room, and I'm also thinking that elements of your work, either working collaboratively or as a soloist have been at places like Transmission or the CCA or the Civic Room.

AH: Yes.

SG: So I guess I'm curious about your sense of, what's the sensibility in your experience of those spaces that makes them right for working in an inter-disciplinary way? Is it just about particular curators being open to it? Is it as simple as that?

AH: I think it's a mixture, I think it's an ethos. First of all, I think Glasgow as a city has an amazing ethos, I guess it has a background in DIY culture, but it feels like a community, and it feels like anyone can find your community here. It might be harder, it might take longer, but there is a kind of ethos of coming together, of working together. I've never felt like this was a competitive city as an artist, and this is comparatively to friends who work in London and friends who stayed in Leeds, friends in other cities. There's never been a sort of competitive, there's this idea of, if we work together then we all thrive. I really attribute that to Glasgow as a whole, or at least that's my experience of Glasgow in the fifteen years I've lived here. Sorry my cat has come to join me! [laughs]. Transmission is an artist-run space, so depending on who the artists are facilitating it, the focus is always going to be different, but I think just by the nature of it being an artist-run space, this idea of creating a space to make things that wouldn't otherwise be able to happen has always been a thread. I was on the Transmission committee in 2014 maybe, so I kind of already had an understanding of what as an organisation, Transmission can offer artists. Definitely in my

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creative life, I've always made the most of the opportunities to use space, the opportunity to borrow equipment, the opportunity to do rehearsals in a kind of concrete floor with pillars that's really difficult to use! [Laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

AH: But also really interesting to use. In recent years, the focus of the committee has also been on platforming black artists as well, so the collaborations with Project X have really flourished with the support from Transmission. The Work Room, I just think is one of the greatest organisations ever. I mean an organisation that exists to help people to do what they do [laughs], do what they do and dance, and I feel so lucky to live in a place where that is available to me. The current director, Anita Clark has been so instrumental in working with both G.O.D.S and Project X and with me as a sort of individual creator in many ways, from a professional and supportive, also as a friend. Somebody who's just always looking, always thinking about what everyone's doing and always has something to contribute. So with that and maybe with The Work Room it's both, the fact that this organisation exists, but it's also led by someone who's really wonderful at what they do. The CCA have a great ethos, they have all these spaces, and if you want to use them you just have to ask! [Laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

AH: It might not be available, but I tell my students this all the time, you just have to ask! The worst thing they can say is that it's not available, but you just have to ask and I think that kind of way of working as a centre for contemporary arts, it opens the space up so much, it allows so many more things to happen and creates that sense of what you were talking about.

SG: Lovely. It strikes me that, I think [of] Anita Clark's work at The Work Room - I've spoken to a lot of people who have said how incredible that work is and how significant The Work Room has been in their practice – [and] it feels like there's a really delicate balance or complex negotiation involved for someone in that kind of role where you are trying to respond to the needs or desires of a really diverse range of artists working under the broad label of dance and choreography, while also trying to practice forms of leadership as well. So how you balance between setting agendas and creating opportunities, versus acting in a

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more responsive way. That balance of listening and action. I'm in awe of people who do it so well.

AH: And also she's also really wonderful at inviting other voices, I think all decisions that get made and I guess it's a member's organisation so their made with a panel of members, so maybe it's something that you're interested in or someone's particularly mentioned you, or you've been approached, but as a member I've participated on panels for various decision-making and I think the diversity of movement practices that The Work Room represents is kind of because of spaces where voices are brought together to speak, to have a space to feed into the way that the organisation is going to continue to grow, which I think is really important. I think that top-down way of working is, it always was stagnant, but it feels like it's rightly getting pushed to the side, and I guess a good director is a director that brings people together to collectively make a decision. A good director becomes a facilitator in a way, I think.

SG: More broadly, so much of the research I'm doing is centred on Glasgow partly because I lived here but partly because it does seem to be, now and historically, a real hub for interdisciplinary and experimental performance and for live art in particular. But I also know that you've worked with people like The Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop, and am I right in thinking you had one of the Cove Park residencies? So I don't know what your experience is of that broader ecology in Scotland and also maybe going down to England and back to Leeds. You said a little bit about this already in your sense that Glasgow is less competitive maybe than other contexts for making art?

AH: Yes, I've also been very lucky as an artist, I've had quite a lot of opportunities. I'm a serial application writer [laughs] and I really value a residency. Ideally, I would do a residency once a year or even twice a year. Once for the seeding time and once for reflective, evaluative time. I've been really lucky, one of my favourite places to work in Scotland actually is the Scottish Sculpture Workshop which is up in Lumsden and I think they are a really interesting organisation. The reason it's one of my favourites is they view a range of sculptural techniques. I did a lot of work with them doing bronze casting, different types of bronze casting and they've got really wonderful technicians. They also incorporate performance and movement practices into their work as a really hardcore sculpture workshop as well. So one of the first workshops I did there was with a London-based dance

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company called Project O, Project X had actually collaborated with them. We curated a BUZZCUT and they were part of that.

SG: Was that the Double Thrills one at the CCA?

AH: No, not the one at the CCA, that was when we performed. We did one, was it 2017? 2018?

SG: Whereabouts was it?

AH: It was in The Art School.

SG: Oh okay!

AH: We did a takeover of The Art School and Project O were the kind of main performance and then we worked with a lot of Project X associate artists. I think I also performed at that one, an iteration of *Jumbies* actually [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

AH: We did different performances around the building, but Project O did a workshop, I think it was part of DIY, is it LADA that does DIY? They have these professional development workshops for artists and Project O were leading one, and it was blacksmithing for performance artists, so this really physical, sculptural process for dancers and performance artists, and also people of colour. It was this idea that we were going to be sweating the hard stuff, it was going to be physical, it was going to be sweaty, that we were also going to have space to have these conversations, the hard stuff, speak about the hard stuff, find ways of sweating it out, working through it, bashing metal together [laughs]. I met some really wonderful people doing that. Jamila and Alexandrina who do Project O are wonderful. I also met another dance artist, Zinzi Minott, who is doing amazing stuff. Zinzi releases these films called *Fi Dem* which are about the Windrush, she releases them on Windrush Day every year. Zinzi's background is in dance and she's kind of looking at all of these things, looking at the Windrush through the movement practice. I got to meet Zinzi there and I just feel like all of my interactions with the Scottish Sculpture Workshop is this really wonderful but often really unexpected interaction between movement and sculpture that they really welcome. Maybe that's because they're in a village and I guess the movement associated

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with getting to the place, being in the place, getting through the place. It's a really wonderful organisation.

SG: That's great to hear. It's so interesting and hearing you talk about the different possibilities that residencies might make possible. It feels like there's maybe quite an old-fashioned model of the residency which is tied to fixed outcomes like you will go and make a thing and then come back and show us the thing you made, whether it's a piece of performance, or sculpture, visual art or whatever, but it sounds as though a lot of what they value there and what you're describing, is experiential. You might be working on a particular project or reflecting on a project, but it's not to do with a fixed outcome, that's not what the value of a residency is.

AH: Yes, absolutely. I think my best work, I did a research project about Guyanese women in Scotland and that was so dependent on having that residency time. I did multiple different residencies. I did a travelling residency where I went to go and work with a historian who was based in Cromarty and I kind of almost curated myself a route. I was visiting different dance festivals. Along the way I went to Rise festival in Findhorn, then I was also visiting some locations that were particularly tied to my research. I was also moving through the area where the Scottish Sculpture Workshop was, so thinking about how I could I have moments with this movement, this travel-based research, and also do some physical making. The fact that it didn't have to make sense in that moment, the idea that it was going to make sense at the end of the process and then I would know what I was going to do felt really important and actually again, I ended up with this contiguous archive of bronze sculptures that I'd made, because I was thinking about metal and I was thinking about weight, but then also journeys I had taken and in a sense performances that I'd made, trying to re-perform some of the gestures of the women I was researching, being in the places they would have been, doing things that I'd read them to have done. I took video recordings and sound recordings and I just had over a year of doing that. I also went on a residency to Cove Park, I was reading books and making sculptures that were inspired by books and the kind of themes that were coming out of some of these fictional Caribbean stories and collecting all of this stuff. At the end, I had this huge archive of work to do with this research project that I was doing, and then multiple things get made out of it. I've made a sound work from that research, I've made multiple video works from that research, I have all of

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these sculptures that I've made that have been exhibited in different ways. That wouldn't have been possible without these moments to generate this archive, and then the decisions can be made [laughs], and you can make something and show it to people.

SG: Nice. I like that idea of you just saying there, then the decisions can be made. What's the thought that's in my head? I think it's a different quality of decision making at that point because all along through that process it all sounds really mindful. You are making decisions continuously, but maybe the orientation of them is different. They're not oriented on the premise of a showing or a sharing.

AH: Yes.

SG: They are feeding themselves in one way or another.

AH: Exactly, they are feeding themselves [laughs] every decision is feeding the next, the last.

SG: That's really lovely. There was one other project, well there's lots of projects, I was interested in asking you about some of the other collaborative or interdisciplinary works. I was conscious that you had, you can tell me if I'm right or wrong but you worked with Jen Martin on a few different projects? One of which was part of the Sonic Séance exhibition series of events at the CCA. You worked with Jen to make a film, a call and response piece. Can you tell me a bit about that work and how you came to work with Jen? What was that collaborative relationship like?

AH: Yes absolutely. Jen's a filmmaker, I love working with Jen, but Jen is a filmmaker and works so choreographically, and I had an interest, I guess I'm quite a multi-disciplinary person, I also work with film and movement. Jen works with movement in filming physically with a camera, working choreographically, but she also talks about editing with the body which I learnt from Jen and have tried to do as much as I can now. Editing with the body is maybe something that I do in these kind of research projects in these kind of decision making processes, these processes of speculating and choosing directions when working with archives, to then to apply it to editing, thinking about every moment as a beat or a breath and how you can use those to create this flow is amazing and I think film being the main form of documentation of movement and working with a filmmaker who understands that movement but applies it to their art form is just a really wonderful collaboration. *Sonic Séance* was directed by Mele Broomes and produced by Mele's company called V/DA, Mele

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who I collaborate with on Project X as well. Mele had brought together four people individually, so myself as a researcher and Patricia Panther who I later collaborated with on *Jumbies* as a composer, and Letitia Pleiades as a music producer and Mele was working with choreography. It was this idea that we were working together to make a collective autobiographical work that was about women's voices and the silencing of women's voices but also a cathartic call to whatever it is that we might individually call to, to find a way forward or through, and made *Sonic Séance* which was a performance that was performed in Tramway. Then we were invited by the CCA to make an exhibition, but the four of us had been working together for maybe a year or two, a year and a half, just researching, coming together. One week we'd just work with choreography, one week we'd just work with sound, some days we'd set up microphones, we'd bring instruments and other days we'd just be sitting having conversations, I definitely made people do a couple of reading groups [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

AH: And we did have all of this material which, by nature when you're making a performance not everything can go into the performance, but the exhibition was an opportunity to incorporate some of the wider research and Mele also wanted there to be this kind of separate video work where each of us could have an opportunity to explore our personal contributions with the support of a filmmaker. Mele invited Jen and that was the beginning of a wonderful collaboration! [Laughs]. Jen also studied on the same course that I did, Sculpture and Environmental Arts, I think. Also that kind of ethos that you think isn't there, but it's there shaping everything that you do, a Sculpture and Environmental Art ethos. It also just enables really nice conversations. My kind of lifetime of working with dance and performance, in terms of institution, I've worked with collaborators from the Contemporary Performance Practice at the Conservatoire and still to this day I'm continuously working with collaborators who have come out of Sculpture and Environmental Art. I think both courses have a bit of a reputation in their institutions of being the kind of the experimental one or whatever, but I think that the kind of willingness to experiment and the value in experimentation from both of those courses has really contributed to a wonderful performing arts scene in Glasgow.