

LIVE AND NOW – SHEILA GHELANI – EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to LIVE AND NOW, a new podcast series from the Live Art in Scotland project at the University of Glasgow – led by me, Steve Greer – exploring the histories and possible futures of live art and experimental performance in Scotland.

In each episode, you'll hear from one of more than 50 artists and practitioners interviewed for the project, as we explore their work, its influences and the circumstances which shaped its development. You'll hear from artists based in Scotland as well as those whose practice has seen them return here again and again over the past thirty years.

Each episode is accompanied by a transcript, context notes and links to the full interview – you can find these on the Live Art in Scotland website – [liveartscotland dot org](http://liveartscotland.org)

EPISODE INTRO

This episode features a conversation with Sheila Ghelani, an interdisciplinary artist whose work spans live art, performance, installation, social art and moving image.

I first encountered Sheila's work on a visit to Bristol – in the thick of the pandemic – to spend time in the archive of the National Review of Live Art.

Sitting at laptop in a too-hot room, I started to follow the trail of a series of works that had brought her to Scotland: *Sugar Sugar White* (a live performance examining notions of whiteness and purity) and *Covet Me Care For Me* (a durational performance installation in which individual members of the public are gifted a glass heart containing a precious object, and invited to smash the glass to recover the object which is then carefully wrapped to take home).

As I spent more time with Sheila's work, I realised that this moment in the archive wasn't anything like my first encounter with her practice: something made me remember that I'd come across Sheila's work through a 'check list of care' that she had developed following a residency at ARC in Switzerland, and which I think I'd discovered following a series of conversations about care and support at BUZZCUT and Take Me Somewhere, two live art festivals staged in Glasgow.

The checklist is a list of careful, reflective questions that invites an artist to consider the terms of an engagement – whether you will be looked after, whether you will be paid, what the environmental cost might be, and whether the event will be accessible.

In any case, when I sat down to talk with Sheila about her work – on zoom, in the summer of 2021 – I was thinking about what the contexts and relationships through which her practice had been developed might tell us – or tell me – about the shape of the ecology for live art in Scotland, and across the rest of the UK.

As we pick up the excerpt from our conversation, I'd started to ask Sheila about the development of her solo works, and a show called Grafting and Budding. And this led us to talk about her experience of presenting work at the National Review of Live Art, the UK's leading live art festival – curated by Nikki Millican.

INTERVIEW EXCERPT

Stephen Greer: There's a gorgeous little film that's on your website marking five or six years of doing Grafting and Budding. At the start of it there's one of the images in a notebook which says that it was made in response to the challenge: If you made live art performance work on your own, what

would you say, what would you do. I've encountered that work through its documentation and knowing that it's taken a few different forms as it's toured, I think it's the version that was done at the National Review of Live Art. Maybe you can tell me if the different forms are a response to different contexts or partly the rhythm of gaps in showing it?

Sheila Ghelani: I think it's the way I make work. I decided that in my solo practice I wasn't going to put any pressure on myself and I was able to do that because I could support myself through this other company work that I was doing. So I didn't have that sense of having to forge out a solo practice in order to survive. I was getting very satiated from sharing and working with Pacitti Company and working with Blast Theory. It was incredible. I was going all over the world with them both. I was really happy to take my time with my solo practice. I think that's why that developed, I just used those platforms to develop the work really slowly. I never tried to sell my work or get the work out. I was interested in what I was trying to say and I was in that privileged position of being able to do that because I was working with all these other companies.

Stephen Greer: I think I saw, again in that same video, text saying that one of the choices was if the opportunity felt like the right fit. I suppose my question then is, what was it about the National Review of Live Art that made it feel like the right fit or the right possible fit?

Sheila Ghelani: Good question. I hadn't been to it. Caitlin had and she said you must go, it's extraordinary, there's loads and loads of work and you'll love it. I'd heard about it and probably Robert had shown work there. It was like, I was going to say folklore, but it was one of those things that you talked about. It was showing really interesting work. You'd look at the programme and just think who's showing work there. It was great to be able to show work there. Terrifying too.

Stephen Greer: What do you remember of that? Was the first year at Tramway or The Arches?

Sheila Ghelani: It was at Tramway.

Stephen Greer: What do you remember of that first year, if anything?

Sheila Ghelani: Oh god. I just remember it feeling vibey. I remember Jamie McMurray's performance, that really stands out. I remember really loving it, I remember hating the set-up because you had an hour and finding that really like what the hell. It might have been half an hour. That bit wasn't enjoyable. I enjoyed the actual experience of performing. I remember just really loving the whole experience, I think. I wonder where I stayed, I can't remember. A couple of my peers came: Marty Langthorne, who was my production manager and the lighting designer, and he had followed The Living Room Project, and also Dicky from Pacitti Company. My peers and my best friends were there so I really enjoyed it. That's what I remember of it. And also it being a bit terrifying because a lot of important programmers were there. I enjoyed seeing the work, that's what I really loved.

Stephen Greer: In the version that I watched – much of your work has your live presence behind it – there's the trestle table and the image that is projected behind you by the camera that's pointing down on the table. I'm describing this for the benefit of the recording [laughs]. There's a moment, again, it was in the version that I saw so I don't know if it recurs in all of the variations, where you step out in front of the table and you shake or pour a bag of soil onto the ground and plant your feet and then really deliberately make eye contact or invite eye contact with your audience. I wanted to ask you about that, but I also saw your unfinished manifesto for making that you posted recently,

and there was a line in there that jumped out immediately where you said, I want to look into the eyes of the people I'm engaging with, every person, every pair of eyes.

Sheila Ghelani: That whole piece is about love and the story of my parents meeting, so I wanted to think about the desire that happens between audience and performer and so that's why I put that in. I also realised that there needed to be an interval, or a break in the rhythm of the piece and just wanting to meet everyone's eyes as much as possible. I think that's for me really because I'm quite a nervous performer, always have been, always will be. If there's a run, my first performance will be really shaky and then I'll get grounded and I'll be fine after that. I think that was a little bit of me really trying to ground myself and so that's why I step into the earth as well. It's a mixture of lots of things. That moment did stay.

Stephen Greer: There's something about the performativity of materials or objects across that work, but then maybe in lots of your other practices and projects. Maybe I can ask you a little bit about that. It almost made me laugh because when you say once you've made eye contact, you say I'm going to go back round and carry on doing some things. That object work, I'm interested in how you came to that perhaps knowing you had a background in dance. I can almost see that there's a choreographic logic to it, but it doesn't centre round the body.

Sheila Ghelani: That's exactly it. I do mention that as something that I do nowadays which is the choreography of objects. I think it's being interested in how to arrange things and taking the focus of the gaze off me, which I know it never really does. I don't love performing, it's a weird one. I think maybe that's what I'm trying to do with those objects, make them perform and re-focus people's gaze elsewhere than on me.

Stephen Greer: I'm thinking about the installation works slightly differently. I think the second piece maybe that you showed at the NRLA would've been *Covet Me Care For Me*?

Sheila Ghelani: Yes.

Stephen Greer: That's an installation piece, but also a directly participatory piece and maybe another kind of thread in your practice. That had a life prior to the NRLA.

Sheila Ghelani: That was a SPILL commission. Again, Pacitti Company was really important there. That wouldn't have happened if I hadn't had that commission from Robert. That was very much about the audience becoming a performer and they may not necessarily realise it but that's what's happening. They're willing to become the performer; they're willing to put on the funny garb and go through the ritual that I've set out. I was still finding out what work I want to make, and I guess with hindsight, I've realised that I want to make all types of work and it's to do with hybridity and shapeshift and really following the idea and trying to find the right form. I let the form arise out of what the question is that I'm trying to interrogate, I suppose.

Stephen Greer: Staying with the idea or the questions and finding the form, that feels like an articulation of a deliberate slowness. Rather than saying I will do project X, I will hollow it out and then I will put it down and move onto the next one.

Sheila Ghelani: It's always been about trying to follow the research and let that go at the rhythm that it needs. It's a tricky one as an artist because you're trying to survive as well. I think because I had this other company work that I was doing, that sort of enabled that.

Stephen Greer: I want to come back to what allows that rhythm of work. Maybe we can talk about your collaboration with Sue Palmer. I know that you've got longstanding relationships with a few people and maybe the one with Sue Palmer stands out for me. If we follow the thread of the NRLA, the third work in that was in 2010 so it was Sugar Sugar White.

Sheila Ghelani: It was the thirtieth celebration or something. Yes, Sugar Sugar White. I didn't enjoy performing that one. That was in the Tramway. Some of my objects misbehaved, which sometimes they do. They upstage you. That's what I always say, you've got to be careful working with materials and objects because sometimes they do what they want to do [laughs]. Sugar Sugar White was a version of White Squall, which I maybe never really resolved as a piece of work. I was trying to think about whiteness. It's really complicated. Sometimes there are pieces that really coalesce, and they are quickly made and fully formed. Covet Me Care For Me was one of those. I just made it super quick and it worked as it was. I would say Sugar Sugar White, which was on the back of White Squall, in a way that was one I ended up walking away from as a piece of work. I don't know if I ever resolved what I was trying to resolve.

Stephen Greer: When I see it in the context of your other practice, but also more broadly, I'm thinking about the thread of autobiographical practice that's running through this and that these are works that are not about you in a conventional life story sense but are clearly articulations or explorations of heritage and identity and heredity.

Sheila Ghelani: Absolutely. It's an interesting one, my relationship to whiteness. Obviously, I'm of mixed heritage, but legibly, I'm white. I've always had quite a complicated relationship with that and what that means. That definitely played out a little bit in that work.

Stephen Greer: I found some artist pages that you did for an issue of Performance Research which was '24 Frames in Commemoration of You'. One of them looks to me to be like the little China figures which featured in Sugar Sugar White. One of the materials or objects that seem to stick around in your practice.

Sheila Ghelani: They were in that, and they were also in the thing that I did at Kaleid Editions which ended up being the flower press book. They're a thing or a material that I return to, those little China figurines. I often talk about my practice in relation to my two grandmothers, my Indian grandmother Jaya Lakshmi Ghelani and my English gran, Patricia Ann Garrett. Some of those little figurines were inherited from Patricia because she just loved all that stuff and the ritual I think I got from my grandmother. I definitely use practice as a way to process stuff but still also try and put it at a remove so that it's accessible to anyone.

Stephen Greer: There's a moment where you hear the rumble of the trains passing overhead, two moments, there's always more than one moment at The Arches, and you look up. It's quite effortless. It's like another object at work, maybe. That's a piece where it feels like you're very focused on the task of setting out these objects and placing them into conversation and encounter with each other and there is far less eye contact or acknowledgement of the audience.

Sheila Ghelani: Yes. I think that might have actually been me not being fully in control of the choreography or the ritual, so having to focus on the objects. I did that later.. Nikki programmed EPAF [European Performance Art Festival] or programmed a bit of EPAF in Poland and she invited me as one of the artists to go and do that piece again. I remember in that piece, in that version, I felt

much more in control of my materials. It was more of a task-based performance art piece in a lot of ways, with its own logic. I'm concentrating on trying to critique whiteness. I end up stuffing the Nick Griffin BNP tape up a chicken [laughs] and now when I look back, I think what was I doing? But I think I was really working through something. I was working through my relationship with whiteness. I was still very confused at that time. Clear, but also confused.

Stephen Greer: It's not as though it's easily resolvable territory. It's interesting to hear that Nikki was involved in part of the future life of that work. Obviously, lots of folk have observed the significance or the influence of Nikki on the progress of their career. The National Review was at three different points. Looking back, do you have a sense of it playing out a particular developmental role within your practice?

Sheila Ghelani: Yes, definitely, there's no doubt about it. Being in amongst all those artists and also who came to that then definitely had an impact. I remember Antoine Pickels from Trouble, that's pretty much why I got to show Grafting and Budding in Brussels because he saw it. I feel like I had met him with Pacitti Company, but he definitely saw it. He didn't show Covet Me Care For Me. That relationship was important, he's continued to show my work. It was a very important platform. It raised your profile if you were in amongst that network of peers. I think that's what was amazing about it. You'd have really well-established artists alongside some of us that were just starting out and it was great.

CLOSING

Sheila's most recent work includes COMMON SALT, a 'performance around a table' made with Sue Palmer. Staged as a kind of 'show and tell', it explores the colonial, geographical history of England and India. A beautiful book documenting and exploring that project was published by the Live Art Development Agency in July 2021.

OUTRO

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

You can find more episodes of this series with links to the full interview archive – along with the project's other free resources - on our website, Live Art Scotland dot org.