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The recent future of Scottish Art

Robin Baillie and Neil Mulholland

Scottish Art since 1960
Historical Reflections and Contemporary Overviews
Craig Richardson

In a discussion recorded over two sessions, Robin Baillie and Neil Mulholland address issues raised by Craig Richardson’s recently published book ‘Scottish Art since 1960’, which describes its intention as: “Providing an analysis and including discussion (interviewing artists, curators and critics and accessing non-catalogued personal archives) towards a new chronology, Richardson here examines and proposes a sequence of precisely denoted ‘example’ works which make up this self-conscious definition of the interrogative term ‘Scottish art’.” Richardson addresses key areas of cultural politics and identity to illuminate the development of Scottish art and its revaluation in the context of an understanding of the dynamics of art practice today.”

Neil Mulholland: The introduction is something of a literature review with spoilt, it tells you more-or-less everything that’s in the book. The sense of a polemic that’s in the introduction, it’s never really substantiated in a lot of cases.

Robin Baillie: Craig has an agenda which he sets out, but then he does a survey and tries to stuff that agenda into it. The artists only come in as a descriptive framing, you get these wee thumbnail sketches. I’m not saying they’re totally off, they’re not without validity, but they’re not an unpacking. They’re not analytical deconstructions they’re not without validity, but they’re not an unpacking. They’re not analytical deconstructions of what these people are doing.

NM: There are places where the book does achieve this. The section on Steven Campbell does this job well. Craig looks through work as a thing in itself, then looks at its reception and does it justice. There’s a sense of this subject being taken as a case study and carefully built up.

RB: The thing about Campbell is there was international recognition of a kind for an individual doing a non-specifically ‘Scottish’ style. Campbell’s difficult for Craig to write his bigger agenda into, because... maybe he doesn’t like it, Campbell’s difficult for Craig to write his bigger agenda into, because... maybe he doesn’t like it, he’s this misty-eyed, thesis that might work as speculative and historical resources. It’s not historical. This narrative reads differently, a simple, slightly misty-eyed thesis that might work as speculative exhibition or as a catalogue text, but it doesn’t fit well with the institutionalism. It’s not historical.

NM: In scholastic terms, it’s easier to map out this territory, because the SNGMA is still here, there are people you can speak to who were/are there and there’s a good archive. In general, the bigger and older the institution the better the historical resources.

RB: He also lays out a chain of critical writing, and a chain of artists, for which he’s relying on interviews from personal sources – “non-catalogued personal archives”.

NM: On the one hand, he is quite heavily tied to institutions, and so to an (unspoken) institutional theory of art. It is a ‘Police Force’ institutionalism, more George Dickie than Arthur Danto. It’s all about institutionalism. Yet there’s another incontiguous trope regarding landscape and northern-ness that requires a very different approach to this weak institutionalism. It comes across as volkish. It needs taken apart to avoid this, as a geopolitics or via cultural geography. This narrative reads differently, a simple, slightly misty-eyed, thesis that might work as speculative exhibition or as a catalogue text, but it doesn’t fit well with the institutionalism. It’s not historical.

RB: At the end, he invokes a communitarian art that returns to the land and the sea: “Communitarian cultural renewal might include the ongoing preoccupation with the values of the land and the seas in contrast with the resources of the cities.” (p182)

NM: An Turas (depicted, left and top) is simply celebrated at the end of the first chapter, then it just ends.!

RB: It feels like the ‘black square’ of Scottish art.

NM: A hundred years late for the party. [Malevich’s Black Square, 1915, is considered one of the first abstract paintings.]

RB: Craig encourages us to look down this tunnel, and what we’re looking at is the landscape and sea framed by the modernist black square. It’s his perfect form because it sees Scotland through a modernist black box. So here we have it – he wants an art that has a nice neo-modernist frame, that shows us an eternal identity via Scottish landscape.

NM: There’s a section later in the book that describes Dundee Contemporary Arts being built that explicitly fetishises it as a modernist gallery, by which I guess he means the building rather than what it shows: “the emphatically modernist new gallery Dundee Contemporary Arts (DCA). DCAs tall exhibition spaces successively opened out and upwards in sequence, its programme frequently presenting Scottish artists at key pre- and mid-career points and fully presented in comprehensive catalogues.” (p165)

He seems to be genuinely excited about the height of theceilings and quality of the building, certainly more so than, say, what the Dundee artist-run space Generator had been doing since 1999 or what Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design graduates had achieved since the ‘60s – all of which he neglects to mention. This reads like it’s cribbed from DCA’s business plan, or a review that’s actually a press release. DCA is a similar kind of building... it’s very ‘90s. There’s an aspiration through the text to reach this place, this is An Turas, a passage to Venice [Biennale], it’s a goal, a destination. Does anyone buy this modernist myth of cultural progress? At the Heart of Darkness lies a vapour, not a jewel.

RB: He deploys a retroactive nationalism where Scots seem to him to possess a distinct identity and this identity needs to be seen, represented and recognised. What are the means he suggests to achieve this?

NM: There’s an idea expressed in the first chapter, that the Scottish avant-garde all move to London and remain there in exile; these artists are explicitly framed as the avant-garde, a very limited number of artists.

RB: There’s a Freudian-type desire present, a prodigal son parable, about how avant-gardeness can be achieved in Scottish art. That’s the prodigality of it – the artists had to go away, when they go we lose them. Their Scottish nature is lost. So can we build a home for the avant garde in Scotland? The problem is that you can’t – it isn’t produced out of institutional structures.

NM: I don’t really regard any of these artists to be avant-garde, there aren’t any in the book, not in the true sense of the phrase. Between 1960-67, the time covered by the first chapter, the only artist that lived in Scotland mentioned is Joan Eardley. Very little is said of her work and nothing that’s new.

RB: Eardley gets a mention because of her engagement with the land and the sea – that’s Craig’s thing about style, it must reference its idealised context. It’s a domineering slant... always something about ‘What is this nation?’

NM: This follows hot on the heels of a fairly lengthy discussion of Stanley Curstier and the failure to
build the palace of art in the form of the failed Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. But there’s no discussion of the collection, or even of the collection in the SNGMA. It’s a very particular collection; I want to know what the connection is between Edinburgh and Glasgow? We do not see schools, shown in galleries here and what was in that collection. It’s sketched out in the mention of the ‘Modern Paintings from Scottish Homes’ exhibition but there’s no date, it’s just a mention in the same way that Earleidy is; mentioned but passed over. In contrast, we are introduced to Londoner William Turnbull’s work. Professor Mark Boyle and Bruce McLean, who also dominate this chapter, but very little on what was made here, be it good or bad. Why bother going back over this well worn road?

RB: It reads like a survey, it has something to do with establishing a pantheon.

NM: He’s chosen works and artists that he considers exemplars of ‘Scottish’ art. That’s problematic on so many levels. These artists may well have been formative influences on his own practice, but to imagine that this alone makes them a ‘natural’ choice is to be a bit of a romantic. How do we judge this art? The problem here, of course, is that we can make almost anything seem as if it is uniquely and essentially ‘Scottish’. Hence Scottishness is somewhat uncharted. It’s not very glamorous and it’s considerably more sombre. It’s a moving target, we can’t use it as a benchmark to evaluate matters. This act of territorialisation is Arnoldian, Leavisite even. It implies that the ethnic constructions of ‘Scottishness’ that we find in and around art, imaginaries that need to be deconstructed, are the method by which we should judge this art. The problem here, of course, is that there was a blockage – then that’s what this book is supposed to engage with – who have legitimate place in a narrative regarding art in Scotland in this sense. Relatively few get a look in here, while ethnically Scottish. Ultimately with Turnbull, he just happens to be the one that he needs to take us to above all else – he’s the one who needs to be managed. It comes back to a weak interpretative tradition.

NM: If somebody moves to Scotland, then they want to envision a kind of art we would put our names to. That, in a way, is what he’s doing again. He wants to envisage a ‘Scottish Art’ through the career of the artist. RB: It reads like a survey, it has something to do with establishing a pantheon.

NM: That’s the reason that there is a narrative. There were many artists present through the period 1960 to the present – the era that the book is supposed to engage with – who have legitimate place in a narrative regarding art in Scotland in this sense. Relatively few get a look in here, while ethnically Scottish. Ultimately with Turnbull, he just happens to be the one that he needs to take us to above all else – he’s the one who needs to be managed. It comes back to a weak interpretative tradition.

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understand the complexity and dynamics of the situation. There are just so many more models of formal and informal art institution in Scotland – operating at many different levels in many places, doing really incredible things – that simply don’t cover the ground. Can’t have them all, sure, but without straying a little more off vested home turf we just can’t see the bigger cyclical picture, institutionally speaking. Instead of rectifying this problem, National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) keeps popping in, playing the big bad wolf, even in the denouement, where Craig walks through the condensates and imagines how it could have been... It all ends up reading as a very top-down, very "uptown"...

**RB:** Maybe Craig feels more need is required to represent a devolved Scotland, and as such he has a point about the institutions of Scottish art?

**NM:** He talks, interestingly, about breaking NGS up and further devolving it to different regions in Scotland.

**RB:** His view may be that this kind of institution must work for the aim of constituting a ‘Scottish Art’. And it must be seen to be working for this aim.

The date which doesn’t appear in the book, which is like a ghost, is the date of the first devolutionary government. We’re still at a devolutionary stage and maybe he stopped writing a year or two ago, but there’s this implication that the project is not fully delivered.

It’s almost like he has a reality check – ‘Well, we’ve got to Venice, we’ve got (had) the private galleries, but we know how Fiona’s only a fifth of the whole’. Of course, because it’s not exactly what he’s imagining – fantasising that an enlightened avant-garde would exist in a truly independent Scotland – it is shaped by a step on the way. However, sorry, you can’t have an avant-garde national art! There’s a conceptual flaw in that formulation.

**NM:** There’s something similar in his demonstration of how the “Modern Institute introduced a level of hitherto marginalised market space. There were numerous workshop-studio arrangements, that would have on its art production, how is that going to be managed? Once again, the question behind all of these ideas is, how would a truly Scottish institution operate? Maybe he needs to nail his colours to the mast and answer that. He doesn’t evaluate Scottish government policies for funding the arts.

There’s nothing in here about that, little even about the changed conditions of post-devolution Scotland. He just doesn’t get to devolution, it’s too preoccupied with other, narrower artistic goals. His book really desperately needs to have an earlier cut off date on the masthead. 1995 is about as far as it gets really, albeit at times the year 2003 is mentioned. I don’t get any sense of the Scotland of the late ’90s, never mind its art. Where is 1999?

**RB:** He does talk about the struggle for devolution. He talks about the failed referendum in 1979.

**NM:** That’s what’s needed throughout. At the end you’d expect there to be a more politically engaged cog, something detailed about what’s happened since devolution; it’s been more than 10 years.

**RB:** This would actually put into place some of the things he genuinely is interested in, such as, what effect is Scotland’s political status and identity having on its art production, how is that going to be organised, is it going to be democratic, is it going to make reference to a bigger country next door or not? How are the cities going to play things in relation to the nation? But he doesn’t follow through. Instead there is this almost still-born, coming-to-possession of Scottish art – i.e. that we got to Venice, we’ve got some superstars, we haven’t quite got a contemporary art market but we’ve got to Venice, we’ve got some superheroes, we haven’t quite got a contemporary art market but folk have started to talk about us. Then it just returns to aspiration that there will be something even more essential delivered.

It’s a strange notion of change... It makes me think in the paradigm of the national pavilions. The nationalist view would be that our pavilion has to be better than others’ pavilions. That Scottish art somehow should have the ability to be more truthful, authentic...

What’s the difference between somebody who’s been able to take a distanced cool overview and look at the evidence, as opposed to someone who’s got a story from being involved, constituting some of these moments? He’s not got that privilege of being detached, which may lead to an unevenness of judgement. Is it a history, or a critical overview?

**NM:** It’s a question of focus, the method here expressly forces a focus on nodes rather than ties, on autonomous and objects rather than relational relations. The ’70s saw the formation of WASPS, which came with gallery spaces as well as studio space. There were numerous workshop-studio...
spaces of that model, Sculpture Studios and Printmakers, that were and remain crucial. The only one that this network is mentioned is via discussion of LC12 by Alan Smith (1977). In this section, we hear about the closure of Edinburgh’s Ceramic Workshop in 1974. This only happens because Craig thinks that this work is ‘exemplary’. In reading this section, I kept asking, what about the Ceramic Workshop, what happened there? It’s here just as a foil, almost as if its raison d’être were to close in order to enable the production of an iconic work. We learn nothing about how artists used that facility or how if formed part of a network of studio-galleries. In some ways it’s not that different from what happens these days here. Artists are still showing in those kinds of workshops spaces – Glasgow Sculpture Studios, Stirling Warehouse or Rhiwbaba. It’s the same situation. So why isn’t that sort of studio-practice led activity more prominent in this narrative, why isn’t it considered ‘exemplary’?

The focus falls too heavily on the act of consumption, the packaged brand, the gallery. Talking about what the Scottish Arts Council or Scottish National Galleries were getting up to is almost pointless, and in some senses Craig has written, let’s say proven, this: There was very little of interest happening there. So if that was the case, where were the interesting things happening? There’s no way that it follows from this that the situation going on there you’ve just got to dig deeper, or you’ve got to think about it in different terms, ask what was possible? I don’t get that sense of an infrastructure being established and negotiated, how difficult that was to put in place, of sensitivity to the terms of the time and thus of an understanding of the enormity of what was achieved.

Another example is Transmission gallery. It comes in really late in the book; it’s positioned as if it is a separate entity when it was just a continuation of ‘68-style constitutionalism married to the exploitation of areas in post-industrial decline after the events of 1975. It comes from New 57, PASP taking the lead from Space and ACME in London and PS1 in New York – it’s all there in 57’s archive of letters. All of those artists’ names are mentioned in the 70s were talking to each other about how to get organised, how to take over former industrialised areas (Docklands, Hackney, Queens, Leith, Gallowgate) – networking wasn’t just the business of conceptual artists or mail artists.

RB: But if Transmission leads to the Modern Institute, as it does in Craig’s narrative – that there are two ‘tracks’ come out of Transmission and go on to produce the Modern Institute – if that’s the pattern, then his picture of the Transmission model doesn’t have much of a sense of an infrastructure being established and negotiated, how difficult that was to put in place, of sensitivity to the terms of the time and thus of an understanding of the enormity of what was achieved.

NM: In ‘The Night Minds’ chapter, looking at the early ‘90s, he discusses Transmission’s early days. There’s a quick roll call of what happened there that culminates in more lengthy discussion of Craig’s collaboration with Douglas Gordon, Puberty Institution. Although they were both involved with Transmission, this is not explicitly to do with Transmission’s work, it’s just a collaboration of which there were many. Here he’s writing about something that he experienced himself but failing to describe it, he’s just too close to it. In the end, it’s about as far as you can get from an analysis of the early days of Transmission. There are so many other better studies of this period in Transmission – there are Transmission’s autobiographies (both the published and the aborted version), Rebecca Gordon Neshit’s MA Thesis, Sarah Lowndes’ “Social Sculpture”, lots in magazines and journals. There’s so much data there, a great archive, loads of punters to interview. Instead, we are ushered on very quickly to an inside reading of the exemplary performance group Puberty Institution.

Hardly any artists feature in this book when you consider it (trying running a word cloud on the Google Books version). It’s very limited. That’s an issue. It’s not that it should be completely inclusive, it can’t be and there are greater problems afoot in setting out to attempt such a book. However, I think it’s so far in the other direction as to be unconvincing. RB: He’s putting himself in the position of being a protagonist. From this position, authority seems to be attributed to him. This may lead to the attempt to define a national identity in art and to select elements worthy of promotion.

NM: There’s definitely an advocacy of ultimate legitimacy regarding what artists choose, an acceptance of what is happening, a term which I think in some sense is a good thing. Craig clearly voices an acceptable authority upon what’s produced and reproduced. This comes across most clearly in the triumphalism of the ‘Modern Institute’ chapter.

RB: Which would explain that particular selection on who organised Venice, who was involved.

NM: The shameful fact that Scotland has resorted to sending national representatives to take part in the Venice Biennale in Venice. This act is the peak of unadulterated Victorian-era nationalism. What he writes here is terrifying in its proud advocacy of cultural authoritarianism: “The wisdom of the selector curators is in the careful selection of these three artists at the prime of their experiment-driven practices; the artists were beyond juvenile but alert to any new opportunities presented by each and every invitation.”

This is the Birmingham School of Business School (The Fall, 1992), the corporate state par excellence. It’s not meant to be a satire.

RB: Well it would have been a business plan, that was the point of the approach that SAC have taken. I remember when Jason Bowman and Rachel Bradley curated the Venice Biennale Scotland Pavilion in 1999. It was a 19th century exhibition-cum-fair that was opened in celebration – it was quite large and was more low key. It wasn’t artists who could be capitalised upon as on major names at that moment.

At the end of the book… he comes back to this thing: ‘Who are the Scottish artists now?’ But he doesn’t get to right now, he tails off. Which is a strange in a way – he gets to Simon Starling in Venice, ‘Zenom’. It’s the idea of assuming a teleology for Scottish art. So you have to want to is almost pointless, and in some senses Craig romanticises the impact of certain styles as opposed to others.

NM: There was a confusion in a lot of artists’ narratives of the ‘80s between the ideologies of modernism – generally taken as a narrow version of modernism – and Constructivism – with a certain moderne look that people were beginning to revive not just in art, but in design also. People were talking to that just on formal terms, they liked the way it made them feel as consumers. There was never the delusion that this exercise in taste was in fact avant-garde. The style that was avant-garde was the avant-garde, that is the avant-garde of business, the avant-garde of finance, the avant-garde of the corporate state. RB: It’s strange he refers to a Scots ‘diaspora’. Is he talking about Scots abroad (ethnic Scots who’ve moved elsewhere) or a Scottishness that’s a kind of a network. It think it’s the latter the book is about.

NM: There’s long been an opportunistic Scots diaspora, as in the ‘London-Scott’ Scots who have gone away because they want to further their career. They go to a bigger pond. Others became diasporic artists because of clearances or since they had other economic opportunities. So the diaspora’s are different depending on who we’re talking about.

RB: That would be MacDiarmid’s point in the ‘80s: ‘Why can’t we sustain our own artists? Why can’t we recognise the artists among us who are truly forward thinking and advanced?’ Craig quotes MacDiarmid’s book on William Johnstone, where MacDiarmid contrasts his friend’s work with the Colourist school. Craig’s ready to pick out those who oppose conservatism but then he’s ambivalent about the break represented by Steven Campbell’s work. Maybe this is because Craig romanticises the impact of certain styles as opposed to others.

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