The recent future of Scottish Art

Robin Baillie and Neil Mulholland

Scottish Art since 1960

Craig Richardson

2011, Glaisher, 230 pages


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 ‘exemplary’ works which he stipulates as a conscious deflation of the intertextual term ‘Scottish art’. Richardson addresses key areas of cultural politics and identity to illuminate the development of Scottish art, enhancing our understanding of the dynamics of art practice today.”

Neil Mulholland: The introduction is something of a literature review with spoiler, 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 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 to, because... maybe he doesn’t like it aesthetically because it’s figurative, it’s expressive, but also because Campbell has been to place one side to allow the flow of neo-conceptualism to take place.

NM: Because it’s one guy as well, as opposed to a group of people, a ‘movement’ is required.

RB: Although there was a group of them but no one’s writing about them of course.

NM: There’s more of a sense elsewhere in the book of people doing things collectively – in the discussion of the New 57 gallery, or of Transmission – there’s a social network there, one that we don’t get in the discussion of Campbell.

There are five chapters in the book. The introduction lays out what we’re going to hear about: National Galleries of Scotland, Richard Demarco Gallery, The 57, Graham Murray Gallery, Fruitmarket, Third Eye, Transmission, Modern Institute. In terms of institutions, these are the narrow limits of the book’s structure.

He starts in 1960 with the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (SNGMA) and laments that it never took the form that it might have. He describes its residency in Inverleith House and its move to the West End, but there’s never any conclusion reached regarding why this entire episode might, ultimately, have any import. This is especially odd given that what sometimes ends up being, rightly, celebrated in the book is the value of independent curatorial activity. I wonder, why bother with the perceived ‘centre’?

RB: What he doesn’t say is what a national modern art institution should be doing. He criticises existing institutions for conservative bias, establishment bias, traditionalist bias, and possibly anti-Scottishness, but he doesn’t actually map out a possible alternative programme. Maybe because that’s a tendentious thing to do. The introduction describes an institutional structure that he can trace over time, through various galleries and their exhibitions.

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 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 who owns art. Yet there’s another incongruous trope regarding landscape and northern-ness that requires a very different approach to this weak institutionalism. It comes across as volskhi. It needs taken apart to avoid this, as a geopolitics or via cultural geography. This narrative reads differently, a simple, slightly dusty, 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 land/seascape.

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 structure rather than what it shows: “the emphatically modernist new gallery Dundee Contemporary Arts (DCA). DCA’s tall exhibition spaces successfully opened out and upwards in sequence, it’s 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 the ceilings 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 ‘90s – 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 [Bienalle], 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 retrospective 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 Cursiter 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 it. The exemplars of what we might ask? Of their time and place? How can anyone be certain of this, that we have chosen the narrative falls off the cliff around about the 1960s, despite the fact that such managerialism 1949 to the present – the era that the book is writing up a recent history. NM: He wants to envisage a ‘Scottish Art’ through
ultimately arrive ‘uptown’, in Venice. RB: He does ask for a Scottish art history to be written. RB: The narrative falls off the cliff around about 1949, like Ernst Gombrich in ‘The Story of Art’ when he gets to Cubism. This early bit regarding 1960-67 really is a missed opportunity, it's somewhat unprofessional. The rhetoric of such art is dropped in favour of triumphalism when the narrative reaches the 90s, despite the fact that such managerialism hasn't vanished (it has shape-shifted). The more the book unfolds, the institutional character of its bookends become more apparent – a telos of the 'talented bureaucrat' emerges in the increasingly managerial tone of much of this. It's not that this 'Scottish art' is a thing that desperately needs to be managed. It comes back to a weak institutional theory – it's the institutions that do this thing, and they generally do it better without it, at least at first. But there's a happy ending, all the bureaucratic hierarchies are ironed out, and we all live in peace.
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 appear in the book. Can’t have them all, sure, but without striving a little more off vested home turf we just can’t see the bigger cyclical picture, institutionally speaking. Instead of rectifying this problem with the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) keeps popping in, playing the big bad wolf, even in the denouement, where Craig walks through the students who are being trained in Scotland it often bypassed the avant-garde's inheritors, the exemplars. It’s a contradiction; they carry a culture of inheritance and entitlement while at the same time they are innovative and 'new'.

RB: It's the torch being passed on, and the ability to carry the torch. That is a progressivist view. How does he deal with that progressivism coming out of Scotland? I suppose you eventually get to a point where you've been shown in Scotland.

NM: Craig mentions 'progressive tendencies' from the early '70s such as 'New Art' at the Hayward Gallery in London and 'Live in Your Head' in the Highlands. He describes the tip of the iceberg; there were many more comparable shows that the Arts Council of Great Britain sponsored in the early '70s. They pushed post-minimalism, systems art, conceptual art, feminism and postconceptualism. Such work had a powerful voice in Studio International (when Charles Harrison was involved with it), and later Richard Cork) so it wasn't by any means one show in 1972. It wasn't just this one beam of light nor did it all emanate from London. Significantly, key artists in the '70s were working in or working in 'provincial' English towns, like Coventry. It was an international network that was networked in a way that Craig describes happening much later in '90s Scotland. It often bypassed London. So, the idea that, in the early '70s, Scots needed to go to the Hayward in order to see the light in terms of the new work isn't entirely true. We need to remember, of course, that by no means was this kind of work dominant in the early '70s. In Scotland, the art for the so-called avant-garde of the '60s and '70s, what at the time was called Scottish Realism, were from the 20th century, even by the mid-19th century, the original Realists, rather than any of this expansive networked conceptualism that was going on at the same time in England and elsewhere.

RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of RB: I've heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he's the culmination of a line of
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 who's entitled to choose, an acceptance of whose voice voices an acceptable authority upon what's produced and reproduced. This comes across most clearly in the triumphalism of the 'Staging Venice' chapter.

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

NM: The shameless fact that Scotland has resorted to sending national representatives to take part in a 19th century art trade fair is open to celebration – it is unadulterated Victorian-era nationalism. What he writes here is terrifying in its profound advocacy of cultural authoritarianism. "The wisdom of the selector curators was in the careful selection of these three artists at the prime of their experiment-driven practices, the artists were beyond juvenilia but alert to any new opportunities presented by each and every invitation." (p166)

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 survivalist approach you've just got dig deeper, or you've got to think about it in different terms, ask what was possible? I don't get the sense of an infrastructure that was 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 fits into a separate entity when it was just a continuation of '68-style constructionism married to the exploitation of areas in post-industrial decline after the events of 1973. It comes from New 57's PASP4 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 activities in the '70s were talking to each other about how to get organised, how to take over from a further industrialised areas (Docklands, Hackney, Queens, Leith, Glassgower) – networking wasn't just the business of conceptual artists or mail artists.

But if Transmission leads to the Modern Institute, as it does in Craig's narrative – that there 'artists' have come out of Transmission and go on to produce the Modern Institute – if that's the pattern, then his picture of the Transmission model of art is one that should be advocated and re-established at all times, in all places. Or is it inevitable that the market supersedes? Maybe the issue at stake is marketability.

NM: In The Night Minds' chapter, looking at the art of the '80s, 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 and the Peckham Pavilion, Sheffield and Manchester, these cities and boroughs representing themselves independently of states or nations. You have nations that are not states, like Scotland, and you have many more nations that are states that aren't there because there's nowhere there to find it. So recognition is not something bestowed upon you, if you've got the money and the savvy, you can go there. Venice, as an example, is not a market, it encourages pure opportunism – "take the piggies to market". The quasi-fascistic overtones of this economic Balkanisation requires more in-depth analysis – it's not only for the World Trade Centre.

RB: A lot of things he wants you take to the market ultimately. I think he gets confused by this himself. He's promoting 'Scottish Art'. He wants it to have a radical edge, achieve visibility in terms of the art world, and produce a body of critical writing. However, if these goals have been achieved, so to speak, there has been no political radicalism to the achievement of success. Of course, the one thing that doesn't exist, that he wants, is a contemporary Scottish art market.

NM: If there was any home-grown market it has imploded in the last few months, it's totally fallen apart. ... (The book makes no mention of private galleries such as Ingelby, Sorech Dallas or Mary Mary, despite the fact that they all were significant in the period it encompasses. Nor does it acknowledge the launch of many new artist-run initiatives from which some of the new private galleries (amongst others) have come together. There are many ways of looking at this. One way is to fetishise taking 'Scottish art' to the international market. Another is to focus on how art in Scotland has internationalised or broadened itself in terms of who's here, who's come to Scotland. Both are present in the book, but far more much is made of the former than the latter. It's rather wishful thinking or strategically disingenuous. The public sector of the 1990s is also, at times, a fantasy funding land too in the book. Contrary to what is implied, very few artists were supported by art school teaching income in Scotland, fewer still by what Craig calls the "pre-eminence of industrial support in British art (...enabled by the) Arts and Humanities Research Board and improved levels of income from charities such as the Wellcome Trust." (p156)

RB: It's strange he refers to a Scotland's diaspora. It's like 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-Scot'. Scots who have gone away because they want to further their career. They go to a bigger pond. Others become diasporic. 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 a new avant-garde as the book seems to suggest. There was an embargo on claiming to be avant-garde from the end of the 70s, it became a joke. "You're not Sidney Todd." I'm not Pushkin. 'You're not avant garde, you're not avant garde", as Ian Dury put it.)

NM: There's been an opportunistic Scots diaspora, where people were beginning to arrive in London and take part. Many 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. Artists are still choosing in those kinds of workshop spaces, Glasgow Sculpture Studio, Irvine Warehouse or Ruhaba. 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 'example'?

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 book is convincing: 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 the sense of an infrastructure that was 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 book is Constructionist – with a certain modern style look that people were beginning to arrive 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 a new avant-garde that the book seems to suggest. There was an embargo on claiming to be avant-garde from the end of the '90s, it became a joke. "You're not Sidney Todd." I'm not Pushkin. 'You're not avant garde, you're not avant garde", as Ian Dury put it.)

Neodermone was one of those well thumbed avant-garde grave stones, a mere signifier, a mainstream dressing up box, a text book lesson in how modernism failed (one we had already learned in the '80s) that took itself very seriously. This was just like any other revival – like the late '80s '60s revival, or Biba reviving '30s fashion in the '60s – it was purely aesthetic, without any political edge. It keeps popping up, this constructivist corpse, as if it were avant-garde. It's wasn't then and it isn't now.

The full exchange is available online at: www.variant.org.uk