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The recent future of Scottish Art

Robin Baillie and Neil Mulholland

Scottish Art since 1960

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 will define a 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, 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 suffice that agenda into it. The artists only come in as a descriptive framing, you get see wee thumbnail sketches. I'm not saying they're totally off, that 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 it, because... maybe he doesn't like it aesthetically because it's figurative, it's expressive, but also because Campbell has to be placed to 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 group of people, a 'movement' is required. Because it's one guy as well, as opposed to a place. Although Campbell has to be placed to one side to allow the flow of neo-conceptualism to take place.

NM: There are five chapters in the book. The section on Campbell is the first chapter, then it just ends.!!

RB: It reads 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 perfectly framed, you get this 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: 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 (unspecked) institutional theory of art. It is a 'Police Force' institutionalism, more George Dickie than Arthur Danto. It's all about writing jobs. 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 volkish. It needs taken apart to avoid this, as a geopolitics or via cultural geography. This narrative reads differently, a simple, slightly dusty-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, 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 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 exemplars of art we might ask? Of their time and place. How can anyone be certain of this, that we have chosen the dotted line, is it? In the same the way that Eardley 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 surveys, 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 to be a good or bad choice of artists. He deals with Scottish identity in a weird Arnoldian, Leavisite way. It implies that the ‘Scottishness’ of art, as if there were somehow degrees of ‘Scottishness’ by which we might evaluate matters. This act of territorialisisation is the book unfolds, the institutional character of its job was to support such activities...it’s sketched out in the mention of the ‘Modern Education’ (SAC) formation. This offers a useful frame of critical analysis, an insight into a managerialism that was hotly contested at the time (still is...). He dates this top-down management of the arts dating back to the time that SAC still ran its own galleries in Edinburgh and Glasgow. He, instead, narrates a move away from SAC's management to describe a recurring strategy of Keynesian culturalism in the ’60s and ’70s. The first chapter starts in 1960 because of the founding of SNGMA, while 1967 is the year of the Scottish Arts Council’s (SAC) formation. This offers a useful frame of critical analysis, an insight into a managerialism that was hotly contested at the time (still is...). Rb: He doesn’t actually interrogate the issues around these periods, he assembles them by saying who he likes within them. It goes back to the chains which artists can be linked together to form a narrative that brings us to Glasgow 1990? That’s the point he needs to take us to above all else – he loses interest after that point altogether. NM: The narrative falls off the cliff around about 1994, 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 un grd...without the need of a narrator who was part of that generation, and it was. That little it would have been perceived to be ‘successful’ on such terms, nor might it really be worth ‘celebrating’ in this way. We are supposed to think, jingoistically, of a ‘national’ art, but that’s exactly what it needs more work. It’s a dirty art historical job but one that really needs to be done. There are points where it does happen, Glen Onwin’s work is discussed at length, that’s helpful. However, even here, for me, Onwin’s work opens an opportunity to discuss how educational Art more widely, the fact that ‘public art’ was taught in the art schools around Scotland, not just at Glasgow School of Art. Muralism, environmental art, mixed media were all approaches taken that are part of a peculiar generation of art making that might be the subject of further work. Artists were being trained to fulfill a social role. What that meant in the context of these courses was very broad because it went from stained glass to something more placement based. It really was a very broad church with a rich history to unpack. From reading the book, it feels almost as if it was cut and we needed John Latham to come and make a point that there was such a practice. Again that’s another missed opportunity to do some valuable research into what already existed in Scotland. Rb: He does ask for a Scottish art history to be written. NM: So you’ve got to take it on as it is. Rb: We’ve got too many surveys already. Most Scottish art history is survey-based – Duncan Macmillan’s and Murdo McDonald’s books, for example. One exception is Tom Normand’s ‘The Modern Scot’ written about the Scottish Renaissance. NM: McDonald and Macmillan are at least finding something of value back there in the Scotland of the 1960s, whatever that might be. Craig doesn’t value that work in the way they do – I’m not suggesting that he should. I’d at least like to see a considered re-evaluation of it, albeit that this might be a negative one. We’d all like the received narrative to be taken to task. There is a sense of what this could offer. He repeatedly uses the book’s title “the Modern Scot” to describing a rethinking strategy of Keynesian culturalism in the ’60s and ’70s. The first chapter starts in 1960 because of the founding of SNGMA, while 1967 is the year of the Scottish Arts Council’s (SAC) formation. This offers a useful frame of critical analysis, an insight into a managerialism that was hotly contested at the time (still is...). Unfortunately this idea of country 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 bylines become more apparent – a telos of the ‘talented bureaucrat’ emerges in the increasingly managerial tone of the book. The book seems to conclude with perhaps most importantly, whether thinking about positions at different times. That Scottish lass doesn’t fit exactly. RB: What’s that mean? It’s not rigorous. Alright, none of us are as rigorous as we’d like to be – but this loosens his terms and goes back to this idea: What is Craig’s aim in talking about Scottish art? Is it to constitute it? That would be the aim of Hugh McDermid in the ’30s, to actually say, ‘We want to envision a kind of art we would put our name to’. That, in a way, is what he’s doing again. He wants to envisage a ‘Scottish Art’ through writing up a received narrative of this kind, which is... NM: If somebody moves to Scotland, then they gain an involvement in its life and culture. 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, while ethnically Scots, do? SCR, Scottish Cultural Review, Scottish Art, dotSCOT, etc. Since ‘Scottishness’, like any other form of ethnic identity, is constantly contested, a moving target, we can not use it as a benchmark to evaluate anything. RB: Try to make Ian Hamilton Findlay exemplary of anything? Findlay is the artist who should escape this trap most, because he denies many categories. He deals with Scottish identity in a weird modernist, minimalist, concrete way, in terms of the sailing boats, but not as romantic aspiration - that is projected onto neo-classicism. Findlay takes that Enlightenment universalism and he hammers it too. He shows the extreme authoritarian edge of it – order, discipline, militarm in is there as well. So the question then is complex, how do you explain that in terms of ‘Scottishness’?
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 count. Can’t have them all, sure, but without straying a little more off vested horse turf we just can’t see the bigger cyclical picture, institutionally speaking. Instead of rectifying this problem the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) keeps popping in, playing the big bad wolf, even in the denouement, where Craig walks through the crowd and imagines how it could have been... it all ends up reading as a very top-down account, a 'uptown'...

**RB:** Maybe Craig feels more need is needed to represent a devolved Scotland, and as such he has a plan for 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 devolved Scottish government. We’re still at a devolutionary stage and maybe he stopped writing a year or two ago, but there’s this implication that there might be a change in the future.

It’s almost like he has a reality check – ‘Well, we’ve got to Venice, we’ve got (had) the private gallery and we know how Fimose is all this’. 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’s very different from the way that he talks about how Cranbrook, 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 orientation of progressive and formally challenging artists’ (p.167) Here is a definite correlation of making things happen ‘progress’! To be challenging they don’t actually mean being politically avant-garde, but it’s very clear that they’re supposed the avant-garde’s inheritors, the exemplars. That’s a contradiction; they carry a culture of inheritance and entitle 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 from outdoors Scotland? I suppose you eventually get to one of these radicalism coming from Scotland.

**NM:** Craig mentions ‘progressive’ tendencies from the early ‘70s such as ‘New Art’ at the Hayward Gallery in London in ‘72, and ‘Live in Your Head’ in ‘69. This is just 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-minimilism, 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 New Art such as ‘writers such as’ or ‘artists such as’, or ‘artists such as’, or ‘artists such as’, or ‘artists such as’.

Craig consistently resorts to generalisms in the book, using stock phrases: ‘exhibitions such as’, ‘artists such as’, or ‘artists such as’. It creates such as’, or ‘artists such as’. It creates such a confusion of ‘types’, as if very specific a part can stand in for the whole. You can’t pull this off. It’s the same problem when writing about what went on in 1958 as in 1968. Craig’s tastes are seen so much different positions on what was, at a given time and place, the ‘new art’. The same goes for any artist we may mention, ... or any writer.

**RB:** ‘The avant garde premise of a sequence of Scottish articulations in the 1960s extended the term “Scottish Art.” ‘ (p.61) What was their aim? Probably not. What is this term ‘Scottish Art’ and how did a sequence of avant-garde or new art extend it? Is it: ‘We’ll claim these avant garde art works for “Scottish Art”, and then bind them into its story’?

**NM:** That’s just territorialisation isn’t it? ‘Scottish Art’ in the New 57 Edinburgh in 1972, for example, meant something really very different from the later period at which Duncan Macmillan published Scottish Art 1460-1990. The territory is always shifting.

**RB:** You couldn’t say that the Demarco Gallery had anything other than an internationalist perspective. Its based in Scotland, Edinburgh more so than anywhere else. It aspired to the freedom of avant-garde movement – transfer and cross-over. Granted, Demarco takes Beuys up to the NR 57. Beuys is probably more of a proto-Scottish nationalist than Demarco because Beuys is into German romanticism whereas Ossian, for example, has a massive presence.

**NM:** Demarco is transnationalist, although he’s an advocate for Scotland, he is always wishing for a postnationalist context...

The show ‘Strategy Get Arts’ is discussed here in a way that doesn’t really open it up. What was interesting about it, beyond the show itself, is that students who were there at the time, who went on to teach in Edinburgh or took over the committee of the New 57, started to make similar links in relation to what they would bring to Scotland.

So it was important in terms of another legacy, its direct impact on the grass-roots. It filtered down. Glen Owin’s teaching and work at New 57 was influenced by it. Alan Johnstone is mentioned in the book a lot at points, another artist with deep roots in German (and Japanese) post-minimilism. I want to know more about these connections, instead of a reiteration of what we know about the big benchmarks and art myths.

**RB:** Even if he’d been more upfront about testing these people for their role in a national agenda, the survey takes over. He doesn’t want to squeeze these people too hard in criteria. He finds that the role that bothered Scottishness. This tests his presumption that you can write a national art history in a country that is part of a bigger unit, whether that’s Britain or Europe...

**NB:** Again, if you’re going to do it then you need to take it warts ‘n’ all. You’ve got to write about things that you don’t like, to be impartial about it. History doesn’t unfold as we might like it to.

For example, there is a section of the book that follows the story of Scottish Arts Council grants in the ‘70s. It’s similar to reading the New 57s, invective mail at the time; it just as easily could be a letter written last week by Generator to Creative Scotland. It’s interesting, to me at least, but the question is, how do you deal with this historically? In the book, it is all about not being able to get what you want, hardly a new experience for artists.

**RB:** Once again, the question behind all of these critiques 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.

**NM:** 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.

**RB:** The 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 book, 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 did Scotland’s political stage have 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-possess 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 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 to start... It makes me think in the paradigm of the national pavilions. The nationalist view would be that our pavilions 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 distance cool overview and look at the evidence, as opposed to who’s got a story from being involved, constituting some of these moments? He’s no longer 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 autorefs and objects rather than relations. The ‘70s saw the formation of WASPS, which came with gallery spaces as well as studio space. There were numerous workshop-studio...
It’s here just as a foil, almost as if it’s the Ceramic Workshop, what happened there? Ceramic Workshop in 1974. This only happens section, we hear about the closure of Edinburgh’s section, we hear about the closure of Edinburgh’s magazines, etc. There’s so much to draw on, a great pubs, networkingasted in the position of being a protagonist. From this position, authority seems to be attributed to others. This may lead to the attempt to define a national identity in art and to select elements worthy of promotion. There’s definitely an advocacy of ultimate legitimacy regarding who gets to choose, an acceptance of who has legitimacy, who recently voices an unadulterated Victorian-eranationalism. What he writes here is terrifying in its proud 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 engaged in important discussions and awareness at that moment. At the end of the book... he comes back to this: ‘Who are the Scottish artists now?’. But he doesn’t get to right now, he tails off. Which is 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 Douglas, and you’re not avant garde”, as Ian Dury put it.) Neomodernism was one of those well thumbed avant-garde, it’s a case of getting Anything can go to Venice, it’s a case of getting your hand up, being selected. People have taken. I remember when Jason Bowman and Rachel Bradley curated the Venice Biennale Scotland Pavilion, the biennial, different from the original in the last six months, it’s totally implosion. The public sector of the 1990s is also, at times, a fantasy 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 applied research support in British art (...enabled by the) Arts and Humanities Research Board and improved levels of income from charities such as the Wellcome Trust.” (p154)