

# The Shape of Things to Come

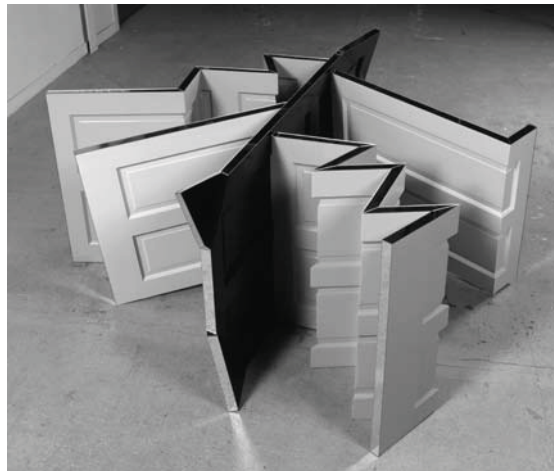
## (Not about Scottish art critics but why there are so few of them)

By Craig Richardson

*'Their flesh will become parchment.  
And I will drain away their souls.'*  
Tom McGrath [1.]

### Shape

In order to provide a shape to this under-examined aspect of Scottish art it is necessary to provide a brief history of Scottish art since 1960, the year of the opening of The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, a welcome event which nevertheless took place alongside the ongoing Diaspora by Scottish artists to England. In the 1960s the UK has no specialised art magazines, however Scotland had even fewer facilities for the visual arts – no public access workshops, no subsidised artists' studios. Only 'Our Art Critic' in the *Glasgow Herald* published a serious attempt at widely read constructive art criticism focusing on an unusually disparate community. Emerging influences, such as Ian Hamilton Finlay on national art and poetry, refused to assert the value of a 'Scottish revival', while Joan Eardley's 'Winter Sun. no. 1' (1961-2) typified the persistent solitary approach to the natural environment.



Since the mid-1970s the Diaspora is to more distant places, although hypothetical speculations over the influence of writers were they closer to the place of their birth, such as Los Angeles-based Scot Thomas Lawson, offer amusing exercises. European and American art magazine publishing is now highly influential, although the international import of 'land art', 'conceptual art' or 'minimalism', visual art whose vernacular import had been recognised in other countries, remained ignored by the dominant Scottish art institutions during the 1970s. Implicit characterisations of Scottish art were sometimes imbued with a clear international outlook, and hesitantly demonstrated through visual art criticism, particularly in the writings of Cordelia

Oliver ('Our Art Critic') now writing for *The Guardian* under her own name. 'Humanist' post-minimalist painting was practiced throughout the 1970s and its reception by critic Paul Overy in exhibition catalogue essays provided an early identification of a new 'Scottishness' in the nation's art, evidenced in an essay on Ken Dingwall's paintings '*it is not a natural grey ... like the North Sea seen from the window of an aeroplane*'. [2.] A special Scottish supplement of *Art Monthly* no. 1 (October, 1976) debated the distinctive

merits of Scotland's art in a European context capitalising on developments at Edinburgh's New 57 Gallery. In later years *Frieze* magazine no 1, *Tate Magazine* and *Contemporary* featured prominent contextual overviews of Scottish art.

During the regretful decade 1979-1990, separated from the culture of Thatcherism but nonetheless encased within its political and

economic structures, Scottish artists experienced an international level of reception which arose partly through their overtly subjective Scottish representations. Particularly prominent, the expressive-figurative concerns of exhibitions such as 'The Vigorous Imagination' (S.N.G.M.A., 1987) followed international exhibitions such as 'Zeitgeist' (Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 1982) and this remains an extensively represented period in major Scottish art collections. Alternative critical perspectives to common themes such as landscape appeared in 'The Unpainted Landscape' (1987). Provocative resistance to the growing hegemony of the Scottish Arts Council and The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art



appeared in print and was exemplified in the curatorial outlook at the Graeme Murray Gallery and through Mark Francis at The Fruitmarket Gallery. A further divergent intellectual counter-balance appeared in emerging publications such as *Variant*, its honest-speaking led to acrimonious debates, one notably described by Neal Ascherson as the 'cult of failure'. Fully sanctioned by The Scottish Arts Council *Alba* magazine had a patina of respectability in its editorial content. Like policemen, artists seemed to get younger, current complaints regarding the age of selected artists for the forthcoming Scottish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2007 'because it's our international reputation that's involved here' [3.] were an ongoing feature even then. Transmission Gallery's appearance in the 1980s began a wider engagement with a developing English and global art-world and provided an unexpected means for curatorial continuity in Scottish art.

From 1990 to the present day the prominent role of the 'miraculous' young Scottish Artist is contrasted with comparatively poor financial resources for Museum collecting of Scottish art. Hagiographic articles appeared in U.K. art magazines as standard. Writers collaged empty phrases around

a now familiar D.I.Y. narrative, 'non-commercial, home-brewed, multimedia – Glasvegas' [4.] when in fact the direction visual art has taken is decidedly commercial, a 'fuck-you formalism' in a phrase coined by artist Ross Sinclair. As always the contemporary includes retrospective period exhibitions, such as 'Here + Now' (Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2001), which reprise each era's implicit definition of Scottish art then and now, through which questions of national independence and the related sustainable Scottish art-market are conflated, conditions which *Map* magazine currently articulates well. Art catalogues appear in all major civic galleries and contain new writing, although cited by artists is the dearth of new Scottish art-writers. A significant number of artists receive ambitious levels of support abroad. Gallery visitor numbers are impressive. From troubled beginnings Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art saves itself from an irredeemably kitsch exhibition policy and schizophrenia-inducing cracked mirror foyer. Dundee Contemporary Art moves art ever-

northwards, towards a professionalised Nordic sensibility, Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery returns its attention to Scottish artists. Art becomes more academic or rather Academia 'gets' art. Artists even move to Scotland. Glasgow's The Modern Institute or doggerfisher in Edinburgh, bringing new levels of art-market support for selected artists. Artists win all the big prizes. Some exhibitions contain a spirited and not quite ironic call for the nation's culture to be re-evaluated. Scotland gets a permanent footing at Venice, not once but three times, enabling critics to grumble it wasn't as good as the one before, forgetting that before the 'before' was nothing. The mood is buoyant, embedded and believable.

And yet, one of the aspects of Scottish art during this period is the perception of ineffective newspaper criticism, particularly the lack of analytical statements which discuss Scottish art's values, even summarising the essays in advocacy which appear in exhibition

catalogue essays.

The relevant background material is increasingly available; chronologies of Scottish Art in general were very rare up until the late 1980s and Duncan Macmillan's 'Scottish Art 1460-1990' (1990) is the first to attempt a coherent narrative of the subject concentrating 'on



the more important artists'. [5.] Its reissue in 2000 coincided with Murdo Macdonald's 'Scottish Art' (Thames and Hudson, 2000), its traced historical lineages are continued through his recent exhibition catalogue essays. Macmillan's 1990 preface identified two further contemporaneously focused publications: Edward Gage's 'The Eye in the Wind, Contemporary Scottish Painting' (1977), with its endearing dedication 'For the people of Tomorrow', and Keith Hartley's catalogue 'Scottish Art since 1900' (1989) – writers with a notable presence respectively through art journalism and catalogue essays. Few contemporary chronologies since 2000 have such ease with Macmillan and Macdonald's timescales, or benefit from a similar protracted subject experience. Sarah Lowndes 'Social Sculpture: Art, Performance and Music in Glasgow' (2004) contains catastrophic indexical errors, suffers from artists verbatim recollection and unknowingly contests the curve of Macmillan's monograph, particularly its omissions. Macmillan's 'Scottish Art' (1990) invited a view that 'All history



is provisional' (p.10) and Neil Mulholland's often excellent 'The Cultural Devolution: Art in Britain in the Late Twentieth Century' (Ashgate, 2003) brought a uniquely northern perspective to the U.K.'s post-1960s art and its unique and untold influences upon its own visual art. In a profound cultural omission there are no UK monographs adequately detailing Scottish art as a separate and distinctive entity although it is sampled in the general chronologies.

The substantial body of writing on Scottish art during this period appeared as catalogue texts on Scottish artists and in those rarities, the regularly appearing magazine with longevity such as *Variant*. Exhibition catalogues appear with growing frequency from the 1970s onwards, initially through the aegis of the Scottish Arts Council. Up to this point some exhibitions were acknowledged through a brochure or short pamphlet with minimal reproductions and an un-credited introduction. In a marked departure the 1968 exhibition and colour catalogue 'New Environment' presented a series of 'enviro-cells' which proposed a new development, in Buchanan's words, 'Environmental Art' [6.] Curated by SAC Director for Visual Arts William Buchanan, John Lamb Paterson (then a lecturer at Edinburgh University's Department of Architecture and Edinburgh College of Art) projected a sympathetic accord for public involvement within cities, in which transition and regeneration are necessary, to preclude complete urban collapse. Buchanan and Paterson's short essays and Paterson's reproduced artwork, pristinely designed generic structures or cells, provided examples and illustrated models of how we might consider our present living environment as resonant with past purpose but in desperate need of adaptation. Cell number 4's 'walled enclosure', considered forms of sanctuary alongside dungeons, both 'set apart from the daily inter-action of urban life' and the text becomes a polemical commentary on the inhumane nature of the prison cell which 'represents the traditional and ritualistic means of interrogation, trial and imprisonment for those in society who do not conform to the pattern required of them by the urban social structure'. Redolent now of a familiar Foucauldian thesis, Paterson proffered solutions in imaginary spaces 'where spiritual receptivity ... could be realised'.

From the late 1970s and more so by the mid-1980s a number of well-known Scottish artists enjoyed discursive essays on their works produced by English-based writers and critics. A highly regarded exemplar of the benefits of such ongoing interpretation, seemingly a mutual benefit to both parties, is seen in academic and writer Stephen Bann's work on Ian Hamilton Finlay. Others making regular contributions to the field, such as Paul Overy in the 1970s and Stuart Morgan in the 1980s, occasionally strayed into an inferred definition of Scottish art's characteristics.

Steven Campbell's catalogue for his 1985 Fruitmarket Gallery exhibition includes Morgan's convincing essay, 'Between Oxford and Salisbury' which demonstrated the paintings' *'spirit is one of serious burlesque, treating the history of painting synchronically by condensing it into a single, complete ideal which exceeds his power to attain. Ineptitude is the cutting-edge of his art; protected by a kind of Romantic irony which permits him to distance his own feelings from the act of painting and point to the comic pretensions of his own seriousness, he creates that discrepancy crucial to an art of signs.'* [7.] By comparison, and reflecting less the fashionable interest in semiotics, Duncan Macmillan suggested Campbell's 'new generation' art *'accepted that the non-linear, collaged view of experience proposed by Paolozzi has replaced old certainties.'* [8.] Both approaches to Campbell invoke surrealism-lite methods, but other critics such as Edward Lucie Smith placed the critical stress upon Campbell's *national* identification: *'Nevertheless Campbell, having so firmly ignored England and English institutions when planning his career strategy, remains obsessed with English (not Scottish) culture. Remaining ... helplessly attached to a world which in theory he dislikes and condemns ...'* [9.]

As for home-grown art newspaper journalism, in attempting to identify any influential critic who published in a Scottish newspaper outlet, one prominent Scottish artist speaking for his generation (and who shall remain unnamed), recently mentioned to me that given the excellent quality of writing by Neil Mulholland, Malcolm Dickson, and Francis McKee, elsewhere in catalogues and magazines, each of which representative of a recognisable critical constituency, he *'couldn't think of a single piece of writing, conversation or debate by any Scottish critic.'* [10.] Almost no Scottish newspaper art critic has proposed strategically important adaptations or developments in Scottish art.

One or two newspaper reviewers' output, notably Cordelia Oliver, have stood the test of time well, particularly her salient selection of proven exemplars in the field and alliances with like-minded entrepreneurial spirits such as Richard Demarco, which now trace a reliable chronology. However most contemporary Scottish artists have treated contemporaneous newspaper writing with an unspoken low-level contempt or as a necessary outlet for free advertising or promotion. The Berlin-based Scottish artist David Allen recently proposed *'written criticism affects (my) work more indirectly than directly. In as such that I don't think I'd alter my approach or method after reading a review but rather that the review works on the work outside the control of the artist. Reviews can popularise, celebrate, promote, support, and advertise good and bad in an artist's work. It's the town-crier.'* [11.] Moderate-minded newspaper art critics deal in surface appearance; however the best, such as



Oliver, attempt to imbue the article with a moderating discursiveness and re-interpretative recollection of other works, a form of qualitative comparison. But any method is highly contingent in this format. Above all the demands of overnight expression serve to create the conditions in which the glib utterances work to sever the considered judgment from its rightful context – History. Most reviewers realise this in due course, longevity not being a noted feature in such careers. Enthusiastic advocacy turns to doubt, revision and dislike. A need to explain becomes the urge to disdain. Which prominent artist hasn't experienced the dismissal of the advocate turned prosecutor? The grim inevitability, as the sun rises on their day, once supportive critics have become a blackened orb in a bright sky. The truth of it is Scottish artists have nothing to fear from their critics. The few that are published are mostly ignored.

*'It all boils down to a question of faith,'* wrote Thomas Lawson, in his 1981 *Artforum* essay, 'Last Exit: Painting'. [12.] And if *'Young artists concerned with pictures and picture-making ... are faced now with a bewildering choice'* (which Lawson listed as tradition, pluralism, mannerist Modernism or compromised radicalism, 'despair, or the last exit: painting') how is the critic to ascribe new directions and give their role influence? Sure, a developed mocking tone is a powerful stylistic approach with which to spike the promotional aspects ever-present in visual art, a healthy cackle at others' pretensions. However, as if it were some form of audit commission, or barometers of popularity, increasingly art reviews appear with stars charts. As if to exemplify this, and perhaps aware of the time-limited contribution art-writers can bring to their field, *Glasgow Herald's* long-time tedious and unpredictable art journalist Clare Henry once stamped her integrity firmly to the mast through her assertion to me that she was *'doing art criticism, not promotion'*. Yet who recalls the crass pomposity of her late 1980s awards of New Year's Day 'Oscars'? A badge of dishonour, I was once the recipient of 1989's 'most promising newcomer', a hasty prediction as my CV shows. Nonetheless she exemplifies the difficulties with Scottish art criticism since 1960, and rightly observed in *The New York Times*, 20th April, 2007 on her marriage to an aging New York gallery dealer, *'First impressions are not always correct.'*

### Things

Providing a shape is not enough. A cultural axiomatic which structures critical debate in this national cultural context was defined by Alexander Trocchi as he laid into a whisky-fuelled MacDiarmid at the Edinburgh Writers' Conference festival in Edinburgh in 1962: *'The whole atmosphere seems to me turgid, petty, provincial, the stale-porridge, bible-class nonsense'*. [13.] Trocchi can hardly have been aware that the following

year MacDiarmid too would publish a damnation of thunderous assertions which offered no consolation to anyone other than his esteemed friend, the painter William Johnstone. Writing in a slim catalogue for Newcastle-upon-Tyne's Stone Gallery [14.] and citing no actual painting, MacDiarmid proposed Johnstone as the Greatest Living Scottish Artist using a logic which can be summed up as 'because I think so'. As intellectual patron to this painterly Delphic oracle he wrote with an Apollonian tremor, laid down a Nietzschean categorical pyramid on which Johnstone sat atop, *'not only the most important, but the only important, living artist, and the only one of international significance ... So his name is hardly ever mentioned'*. Invoking Ezra Pound, Johnstone, was an 'Inventor' and 'Master', all other Scottish artists were 'Dilutors', producers of *'lower intensity'* and *'Flabbier variant'* those *'manipulators of gimmicks'* and *'ambitious mediocrities whose work is parasitical'* only recommended by *"the big public" who have a deep-seated hatred of creative power'*. No artist could read this without wincing and be left in doubt as to who is in charge. And the point is later made that artists ought not to be reading criticism anyway, Johnstone *'does not seek to assert, argue, explain or advise. ... no hand-rails for mental or spiritual cripples.'* Venting Nationalism, MacDiarmid asserts the carefully arranged lack of recognition to this creator of so many practical and educational innovations by the crafty English given, was due to the fact they were *'just using'* him. It is as if MacDiarmid wished to be, to use Trocchi's phrase, *'a kind of bomb'*. [15.]

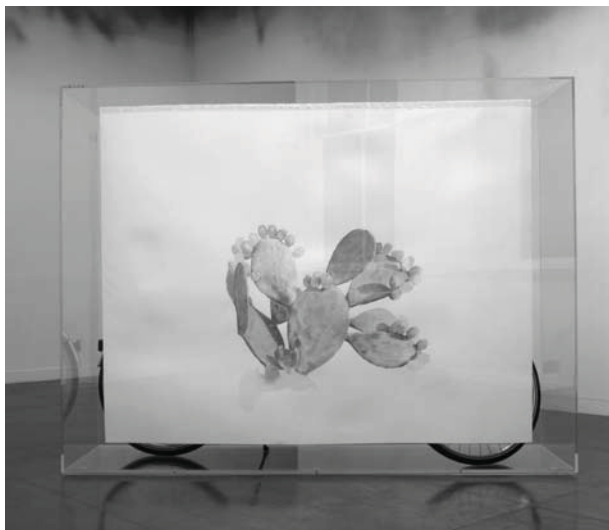
MacDiarmid's deep-seated antagonism to the conservative undertone in English and Scottish culture is the most outspoken Nationalist visual art criticism I am able to locate. Mostly such criticism appeared by implication, omission, and metaphoric expression (usually meteorological). As an ideologue MacDiarmid realised the resident conservative undertone in Scotland's culture necessitated regular colonic irrigation, although famously Trocchi put it to him another way. Launching Variant no. 1, Ray McKenzie and Peter Seddon's early 1980s 'We Gotta Get Out Of This Place' parodied Scotland's fug of provincial nostalgia, barren land, cold wind and warm heart, *'a small group of artists in their middle years sunk in the comforting glow of the fireside, a whisky of questionable vintage creates an agreeable sensation of inner certainty that is proof against the storm of Modernist crisis lashing against the chimneys outside [...]. Before long the overhead grumbles are coming thick and fast ... too clever by half ... all words ... but how many of them can actually draw?'* [16.] Mackenzie and Seddon's use of a negative stereotype of Scottish art, self-satisfied parochialism, is a common method when tackling the National question and its continued conflation of the barren geography with skilfully pictured representation (the 'proof'), but it did raise a fundamentally ambitious aim for Scottish art, namely, *'we must find a way of*





combining Pollock's commitment to Modernism with the breezy self-confidence of somebody like Joseph Beuys'. McKenzie and Seddon's conclusion 'On this barren visual bedrock all true sense of the Scottishness of Scottish culture is either buried, or ignored or brushed aside as an embarrassment' corresponded with a later admonishment in Neal Ascherson's 'Stone Voices' 'mellow nostalgia and the sigh for what has gone.' [17.] As I wrote elsewhere this year there is a need to reinvent some of these mythic stereotypes to the national advantage. Historic correction alone is not enough. Scottish cultural identity is wide open for contemporary representations.

Culturally speaking, Trocchi's description was once correct, undoubtedly from the 1960s until the mid-1980s a confusing and whorish internationalism (to imagine its reception) was kept at bay, the absence of Scotland's art criticism inadvertently colluded to hold back developments of art which were less and less accessible, let alone acceptable to the resident conservative perspective. Hi friend, Glasgow born



Mark Boyle's (and Joan Hills') infamous performance-events refused to the 'Scotch thing ... to separate the pleasures of the body from those of the mind' [18.] and their 'In Memory of Big Ed' (1963) [19.] notoriously involved a walk-on part for a naked woman during an International Drama conference. Further notoriety surrounding her attempted prosecution heralded new beginnings in Scottish art. A later *International Times* account of Boyle's and Hills' further 'O What a Lovely Whore' (1965) described 'a first performance [at London's I.C.A.] which began in darkness with Boyle shouting over the microphone that if the audience wanted an event they'd have to do it for themselves. The audience moved in and went berserk ... the next ICA bulletin commented: 'Owing to the overwhelming success of the first event, the rest of the series has been cancelled.' [20.]

Their legendary 'Son et Lumiere for Bodily Fluids and Functions' (1966) listed and made light and sound projections through the fluids, actions, sounds of live intercourse, played to the audience, nose-snot, sperm and vomit supplied by the performers. Some reviewers considered this no more than a feat of realism – a sponge on the end of a string was used to extract gastric juices – others disgusting and lacking in self-consciousness.

Addressing the burgeoning sense of excitement in Scotland amidst the slow-moving cultural conservatism less controversially, Alexander Moffat, artist and Chair of New 57 Gallery, insisted in a 1976 Scottish Arts Council catalogue, 'there is a diverse range of work being produced by a larger number of artists than ever before ... and the latest art world novelties reaching Scotland so quickly as to create bewilderment and confusion amongst many.' [21.] Moffat's articulation propounded greater continuity in the Scottish culture to which he belonged, believing its depth and qualities were drastically under-represented and by extension

under-practised. Although it is commonly thought Moffat 'valorised painting over other approaches' [22.] this was not so in his art-writing from this period. As early as 1969 his 'project' was 'distinctly radical in content eschewing the painterly charm of much of the established Scottish School but without being the purely fashionable avant-garde which mars much of contemporary painting elsewhere.' [23.] Although Moffat was capable of lofty censure, ('unfortunately most figurative painting in Scotland is a dull lifeless mode ...') [24.] his position was less inflexible than others and his argument more persuasive. Moffat's writings continue to provide a distinctive personal contribution to the National project perhaps defined while writing of the artist Alan Johnston, 'making certain objects agreeable to contemplate' operating in 'a background of European tradition and modernism' and free 'from any form of parochialism ... challenging cultural attitudes.' [25.]

There are distinctions to be made. Alan Bold, Moffat's fellow member (with painter John Bellany) of 'the big three', described stylistic relationships from a more populist stance and incited 'the Scottish public ... need no longer put up with the styles that were copied from the glossy pages of periodicals given over to ephemeral trends' and 'novelties'. [26.] Such arguments were the centre-folds in the debate which has arrested many at the centre of Scottish art for the last 50 years. In his concluding comments Thomas Lawson's 'Last Exit: Painting' (1981) observed 'that continuing debate between the "moderns" and the "post-moderns" that is so often couched in terms of the life and death of painting.' [27.] Ten years earlier Bold had deployed a stylistic



term (later discarded) 'Scottish Realism' (1971) for an exhibition organised for the Scottish Arts Council, a reference to the influence of Courbet on Bold's favoured artists who 'alluded to the Scottish philosophical outlook', an 'earthly concern for life as it is lived by the culturally underprivileged'. Bold asserted his defence of the individualist stylistic vision of Moffat and Bellany's paintings 'for in all these visual activities – exhibitions and events – there was never any strained effort to be Scottish. It was an inescapable fact of life.' [28.]

And yet what does this 'inescapability' usually mean in practice, in the context of Scottish visual art? Often retrogressive avoidance of the contemporary, a civic conservatism, such as revealed in the inaugural exhibition of the Scottish Arts Council Gallery in Edinburgh's Charlotte Square, 'Modern Art from Scottish Houses' (1969). The exhibition and catalogue reflected the 'shrewd' tastes of the resident collections of national Scottish and modernist art and yet 'Modern' refers to the pre-1960s, mostly early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century and rarely contemporaneous. According to the catalogue its curators there were no professional collectors of avant-garde art 'whether from speculative or intellectual motives' [29.] and such expressions were barely represented.

When the writing does spring from the practicing community, the critical writer as friend and acquaintance, as did Moffat's, the style and motive shifts dramatically. An interesting prelude to the formation of The Third Eye Centre (for younger readers, now Glasgow's C.C.A.) is Tom McGrath's arts publication *Nuspeak*. *Nuspeak* was a sometime precursor to the humour and occasional rhetorical savagery of publications such as *Variant* magazine (although *Variant* has proven to be the most enduring historical research source of the later period). Dated from 1973-75 usually consisting of only 4-8 sides of A3 paper, later titled *Nusqueak*, issue 9 then *Nustreak*, issue 10'. In the launch edition McGrath stated 'For the moment the communications explosion isn't a problem in Scotland.' (*Nuspeak* 1, 1973) and he seems to have explored the subject's values by walking up the street, round the corner and knocking on an artist's door. Glasgow's and Scotland's local experience, texture and art gossip is relayed well through such a dialogic method acting as a kind of 'critical insider' and tending towards a light-hearted self-mockery. Its irreverent response to a previous typo 'the person responsible has had his fingernails removed' (*Nustreak* 10, p. 2.) assumed a compliant readership. *Nuspeak* 11 portrayed Richard Demarco, 'He talks slowly, waiting for your notes to catch up with his sentence and throws in instructions: "Write this down, Richard Demarco says ..."' And when invited to respond on art's relations with politics, "Most artists have nothing to say, quote me on that"' Issue no.4 offered up a bumper 'Cartoon Issue!' which ran a strip on 'ArtMan, Captain Video & The Search for Truth' as he crashed

through an Arts Council office proclaiming 'Duchamp Lives' only to be informed 'remember that Grants are for Scottish Artists Only'. ArtMan reappeared in *Nuspeak* 6 with a new villain to test him: 'the Pungent Captain Criticism'. Hilarious counterpoint to the nation's cultural conservatism – 'Will ArtMan get through to the working Classes? Will Wittgenstein be as great as Jock Stein' – it repeatedly demonstrated contributor Cliff Hanley's case in Issue no.2 that new cultural institutions should allow for new, personalised cultural categories and promote a willingness to discuss the full spectrum of visual, intellectual and popular culture. 'People are chopping human pleasure into wee segments and saying Bach good, booze bad. They are enemies of culture, which unless I am a cretin (which I am not) means the complete range of experience offered by society.' (*Nuspeak* 2, p.1)

### Present Day

As for the present day, what is the message? Michael Bracewell summed it in July 2003 *Tate Magazine* – 'Scotland Rocks'. Scottish artists such as Jim Lambie and Simon Starling are met with creepy and adulatory excitement. A well-known figure in a group of artists who have invested Conceptual and Minimalist art practices with a level of aesthetic value which is designedly approachable, at home within the formally innovative and recently highly graphic traditions in British sculpture, Lambie's art revitalises certain cul-de-sacs, most obviously Op Art. With his sculpture and signature floor works certain terminologies are awkward, a corporeal response clearly has an influence, as does the social approach of demarcating spaces and 'relations' rather than carving up material volumes. His exuberant aesthetic concerns seems initially at odds with its locale, however the inspiration for his work arose from a type of 'Glasgow Dreaming', a flannel approach to our recyclable millennial epoch. The critical responsibility for citing precursors is immensely important for Lambie and other artists, and is often overlooked in Scottish art-writing, art just 'appears'. The missing links between Modern to post-



Modernity through which national and international continuities in Scottish art are clearly present is often unexplored. Contemporary constructions of the 'Scottish artist' reflect historical concerns and such potential is witnessed in Duncan Macmillan's description of Ian Hamilton Finlay's art in 1991 which is equally relevant to the work of Simon Starling, 'the punning relationships of words and images disrupted the expectations of linear argument and exposition and set up instead a mosaic pattern of reference which could present startling, unexpected, witty, but also often disturbing connections through the conjunction of apparently simple ideas.' [31.]

In the present-day I contend that Scottish art criticism does not exist in natural tandem with Scottish art. Issues of national identity are frequently reflected in many artists' practice while art's institutions continue to create new exhibitions that supply versions of the catch-all issue of Scottishness in the nation's art. In other European nations, concepts of regional/national identity are an ever more contested and productive cultural field, best exemplified in German art since Adenauer. And yet, critical writing on contemporary Scottish art since the early 1960s, a period of regional/national devolution, has not adequately addressed both the shift from a national to trans-national presence for Scottish art and the political and social changes which have fuelled a wider accepted cultural definition of Scotland. With contemporary Scottish art's highly visible international presence often determined by nomadic activity Scottish art's cultural ethnic themes and subjects are increasingly dependent upon emerging global cultural paradigms. These challenge the formative context of most artists and art writers in terms of national specificities. However the self-determination of an artist as both 'Scottish' and 'international' is once again made with ease. Artists desire an enhanced critical understanding of this context complementing their specific engagement with place and space. The importance of critical writing for Scottish art is recognised by its artists. David Allen again proposed '*analytical statements in catalogues take the artist and the work to new places, draw a line connecting the progress of an artists' output.*' The art-writer's role is central to the promulgation of a cogently argued definition of Scottish art, its art-writing and criticism should challenge and promote its meaning, form and infrastructure.

And yet there seems to be no clear idea as to why there is a lack of contemporary art criticism in Scotland paralleling the prominent success of the last two decades. How do the artworks and resulting critical texts articulate a sense of nationality, how is the cultural hybrid 'Scottish-artist' constructed in critical texts, catalogues and marketing material? And does the writing capture views, attitudes and opinions heard in discussions with the artist, never

that far away in this context? Lack of developmental support might be a reason, but such writing must also arise for its own literary needs, and make its own readership. Amidst all the confidence displayed by visual artists could it be that there is something self-limiting in the culture, some silent admonishment when we discuss visual art? Cliff Hanley saw '*it can be dangerous in Scotland, and anywhere else, to talk about art and literature and all that jazz without adopting the professional expression of an undertaker's mute.*' [32.]

Perhaps the unsustainable financial foundation for Scottish art magazines leads to a situation in which there are no 'career paths' for full-time critics. No-one's quite sure how a serious and purely art critic would 'fit in', what their career would look like if based in Scotland, even if only through newspaper art journalism. Only Duncan Macmillan comes close but is now simply too grand, his publication record strong but partisan. Still, we have no Scottish Stuart Morgan, Richard Cork, Adrian Searle, increasingly informed, networked, having an ability to provide judgement and understanding related in lyrical and ambitious texts, having formed opinions through sitting with artists on the grassy knolls and minimalist bars of Scotland's galleries, filtered through deeper knowledge and able at the end of the day, in the words of the School of New York's chronicler Irving Sandler, to be both a vital presence and a 'sweeper-up after artists'. Politically astute and tactless, menacing and forensic, keen and trained. So, there it is for the present-day, a latent opportunity and an urgent necessity.

*All images courtesy of The Modern Institute, Glasgow.*



## Endnotes

- [1.]  
Tom McGrath SP  
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see 'Justified Sinners' eds. Ross Birrell & Alec Finlay, Pocketbooks 14 (2001), p.?
- [2.]  
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'Ken Dingwall: Paintings, Drawings and Constructions'  
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- [3.]  
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*The Scotsman* (17 January, 2007)
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- [5.]  
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- [6.]  
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- [11.]  
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- [12.]  
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Ray McKenzie and Peter Seddon  
'We gotta get outta this place': A real Scottish art to replace the self-satisfied parochialism of the official artists.'  
*Variant* no. 1 (1984), p.3
- [17.]  
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