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 ‘episayer’ works which should give 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 suﬀuse 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, 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, 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 one’s writing about them of course.

NM: There’s 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.

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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. It 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/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 is a ‘Police Force’ tied to institutions, and so to an (unspoken) institutional theory of art. It is a ‘Police Force’

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 the exemplars of what we might ask? Of their time and place? How can anyone be certain of this, that we have chosen the right works? We'd like the art 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 detail, it's hard to understand the same 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, he give no 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 exemplars of the 'Scottishness' of art, as if there were somehow degrees of 'Scottishness' by which we might 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 we can make almost anything seem as if it uniquely expresses essentially 'Scottish' Hence Scottish Tories, Scottish Labour, Scottish Sun, Scotmid, dotSCOT, etc. Since 'Scottishness', like any other form of ethnic identity, is constantly contested, a moving target, we can 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 tag most, because he denies many categories. He deals with Scottish identity in a weird modernist, minimalist, concrete way, in terms of his background. It takes that Enlightenment universalism and he hammers it too. He shows the extreme authoritarian edge of it – order, discipline, militarism is in there as well. So the question then is complex, how do you explain that in terms of 'Scottishness'? 

NM: I see very broad relations and connections between the work of Findlay, Boyle and McLean, but not with Turnbull. It's curious that this happens to be ethnically Scottish. Ultimately with Turnbull, Boyle and McLean, whatever we say about their work, I don't see of those courses as the real contribution to what this book is ostensibly about, namely the infrastructure of art in Scotland. They all live in London, so how could they possibly make a contribution to this book, let alone here on a day-to-day level? It's irrelevant whether they were born in Scotland or not, they don't have the right to vote in Scotland, they haven't been able to contribute to the geopolitics here... so why are they in this book at all? 

RB: This has to do with the whole Union thing; the Union's in us all: England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Historically maybe the Union is the biggest issue for Scotland. But is this a motivating force in Scottish art? He lassos Scottishness according to from totally different positions at different times. That Scottishlass doesn't fit exactly.

NM: Whether that is a lasso or a noose, I don't know. It comes up a lot and it's very contradictory (as you'd expect). Fundamentally, it's not accompanied with an analysis of nationalism, of what nationhood is, what it was becoming, or of what constituted, which is the real contribution to what this book is ostensibly about, namely the infrastructure of art in Scotland. We are left to speculate whether or not we can categorise these individuals as 'Scottish', whether they themselves feel it, how exactly this identification, perhaps most importantly, whether thinking about such issues helps to better understand their work.

RB: That's what I mean; it's not rigorous. Alright, none of us are as rigorous as we'd like to be – but this loses 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 '80s, 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 tradition.

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 here, while ethnically Scottish artists who left Scotland are celebrated as exemplars simply because they are 'Scottish'. Bruce McLean, for example. He may well have a minimal influence on artists here (and elsewhere), there are lots of other artists who might have been in this sense too, the problem of his impact is irrespective of whether or not he's ethnically Scottish. Keeping the careers of, already well celebrated, 'successful' ethnically Scottish artists a wasted opportunity. The art history of 1960-67 in Scotland could have been the subject of some much needed discussion in this chapter. Even if we accept the idea is nothing was happening – that there was a blockage – then that's what this chapter should have concerned.

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 about around 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 unbalanced. It's not very glamorous and little of it would be 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 why 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 Environmental 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 artists working within the educational institutions. Artists were being trained to fulfill a social role. What that meant in the context of those courses was very broad but 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 we can see through here 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 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 like the narrative to be taken to task. 

There is a sense of what this could offer. He repeatedly uses the Americanism "uptown" 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)... 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, informatively, charts a move away from SAC (which was top-down and developing a curatorial remit towards the idea that its job was to support such activities... Unfortunately, this line of enquiry 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 narrative is, partly an attempt to write a history of art as a history of institutions, there's nothing wrong with that, it's its true place. Unfortunately, this line of enquiry 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 narrative is, partly an attempt to write a history of art as a history of institutions, there's nothing wrong with that, it's its true place.
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 register here. 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, the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) keeps popping in, playing the big bad wolf, even in the denouement, where Craig walks through the exhibit imagining how it could have been... it all ends up reading as a very top-down account, very “uptown”...

RB: Maybe Craig feels more need is required to represent a devolved Scotland, and as such he has a plan for 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 independence referendum. We’re still at a devolutionary stage and maybe he stopped writing a year or two ago, but there’s that implication that the book was written in the mid-2000s.

It’s almost like he has a reality check – ‘Well, we’ve got to Venice, we’ve got (had) the private gallery, we know how Finares 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 an idea one 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 orientation of progressive and formally challenging artists.” (p167) Here is a definitive correlation of making a move that’s ‘progress’! To be challenged, doesn’t actually mean being politically avant-garde, but it’s very clear that they’re supposed 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 Norway/Scotland? I suppose you eventually get on to the question whether Berlin has been shown in Scotland.

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 London in 74. Just over 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 photoconceptualism. Such work had a powerful direct impact on the grass-roots. It filtered in relation to what they would bring to Scotland.

The nationalist view would be that our pavilion at Venice in the ‘70s was the Wrong Art, in the New 57 Edinburgh in 1972, for example, meant something very really different from the later point at which Duncan Macmillan published Scottish Art 1940-1990. The territory is always shifting.

RB: You couldn’t say the Demarco Gallery had anything other than an internationalist perspective. Its based in Scotland, Edinburgh more so than anywhere else that Craig describes as 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 what the new work isn’t even true. We need to remember, of course, that by no means was this kind of work dominant in the early ‘70s. In Scotland there was little of reference 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 in the mid-19th century, the original Realists, rather than any of this explosive 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 lineage right back to Raeburn – the use of colour, light, some kind of truthfulness, expressive authenticity; a classic universalist modernist isn’t a universalist modernist (if he was he wouldn’t be so attached to a nationalist agenda).

It’s more of a post-modern development he’s pushing, where identity is more important than the internationalist values in modernism. He wants the recovery of identity as a goal.

NM: That issue of a vernacular reading of modernism is central here. Craig gets it to explicitly when he writes about how Sandy Moffat was interested in other manifestations of modernism in Europe, in Germany in particular. Moffat’s connections were mainly Germain, so he’s looking the other way from Art & Language; East to Europe rather than West to America.

RB: You could simply say the dominance of the Union at no time prevented international art being seen and understood in Scotland. There was no embargo to prevent Scots learning about it.

NM: Sure. This is where the exhibition ‘New Art’ acts as a cipher from an avant-garde to what at the time was this kind of work dominant in the early ‘70s. They pushed post-minimalism, systems art, conceptual art, feminism and photoconceptualism. Such work had a powerful direct impact on the grass-roots. It filtered in relation to what they would bring to Scotland.

NM: That’s just territorialisation isn’t it? ‘Scottish Art’ in the New 57 Edinburgh in 1972, for example, meant something very really different from the later point at which Duncan Macmillan published Scottish Art 1940-1990. The territory is always shifting.

RB: 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 art scene.

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, or alternatively... or any writer.

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

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 57+; an 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: On a different note: the book really desperately needs 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 more politically engaged codas, 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 as a country 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-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 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 transfer... 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 dande cool overview and look at the evidence, as opposed to somebody 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 auteurs 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 its raison d'être the Ceramic Workshop, what happened there? Because Craig thinks that this work is 'exemplary'.

There was a discussion of £1512 by Alan Smith (1977). In this Printmakers, that were and remain crucial. The institutions, as it does in Craig's narrative – that was purely aesthetic, without any political edge. It was dressing up box, a text book lesson in how modernism failed (one we had already learned in the late 1960s, it became a joke (“You're not Sidney Taffler, I'm not Dirk Bogarde. I'm not very stylish”).

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