



University  
of Glasgow

Thompson, Susannah Catherine (2010) *The artist as critic : art writing in Scotland 1960-1990*.

PhD thesis.

<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/2831/>

Copyright and moral rights for this thesis are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

# The Artist as Critic

---

Art Writing in Scotland 1960 to 1990

**Susannah Catherine Thompson**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Glasgow

Department of History of Art

Faculty of Arts

September 2010

©Susannah Catherine Thompson 2010

All Rights Reserved

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following for their assistance, support and advice during the course of my doctoral studies. At the University of Glasgow thanks to my supervisors, Professor David Hopkins and Dr. Tamara Trodd and to Dr. Ailsa Boyd, Kathleen Johnston and the University of Glasgow Scholarship.

I am particularly indebted to Sandy Moffat, Malcolm Dickson, Cordelia Oliver, Ken Currie, Robert Crozier, and Ross Sinclair for their generosity in responding patiently to my lengthy list of questions at interview and via email and for the loan of original material (newspaper cuttings, photographs and publications).

Thanks to Dr. Euan McArthur for his help in accessing images from the Demarco Archive, and to Professor Richard Demarco for permission to use these images in the thesis. Thanks also to the following organisations and people who have assisted in the collation of research sources and material: to Glasgow School of Art Archives; the staff of Glasgow School of Art library; to Clare Stephenson for the loan of material from Transmission archive; University of Glasgow Special Collections; Edinburgh College of Art library; and the Glasgow Room at the Mitchell Library. Thanks also to Catherine Murray for the transcription of interviews.

Finally, I am especially grateful to my family and friends for their continued support, patience and encouragement. Special thanks to Lisa Thompson-Gwede, David Gwede, Katherine Brown, Michael Thompson, Alex Laurenson, Grainne Rice, Laurie Figgis, Marianne Greated, Craig Purden, Kathy and Tom Chambers, Dr. Neil Mulholland and Dr. Sarah Smith.

## **CONTENTS**

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Contents</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>List of Illustrations</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction:</b>	
<b>The Horse's Mouth</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter One:</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Finding a Voice: Cordelia Oliver, Richard Demarco and Scottish Art Writing from the '60s</b>	
<b>Chapter Two:</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Passionate, partial and political: Alexander Moffat, Alan Bold and <i>Rocket</i></b>	
<b>Chapter Three:</b>	<b>148</b>
<b>'Writin' is Fightin': <i>Stigma</i>, <i>Variant</i> and the <i>Edinburgh Review</i> in the '80s</b>	
<b>Chapter Four:</b>	<b>238</b>
<b>Into the '90s: Art Writing Beyond the Object</b>	
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>272</b>
<b>References and Bibliography</b>	<b>278</b>

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig.1 Demarco, R. (1959) *Jim Haynes' Paperback Bookshop* [Photograph].  
The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation
- Fig.2 Anon. (1944) *Guthrie Award self-portrait by Cordelia Oliver* [Photograph]  
Cordelia and George Oliver Archive: Glasgow School of Art Archives
- Fig.3 Anon. (1944) *Cordelia Oliver at Glasgow School of Art* [Photograph]  
Cordelia and George Oliver Archive: Glasgow School of Art Archives
- Fig.4 *Strategy: Get Arts catalogue cover* [Photograph]  
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archive; sourced from the Demarco Digital Archive
- Fig.5 Demarco, R. (1970) *Stefan Wewerka installation* [Photograph]  
The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation
- Fig.6 Demarco, R. (1970) *Klaus Rinke, Water Jet, Strategy: Get Arts at Edinburgh College of Art*  
[Photograph]The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation
- Fig.7 Oliver, G. (1970) *Banana Trap Dinner* [Photograph]  
The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation
- Fig.8 *Romanian Art Today* (1971) [Photograph of exhibition catalogue cover].  
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archive; sourced from the Demarco Digital Archive
- Fig.9 Oliver, G. (1971) *Cordelia Oliver and Pavel Ilie in Ilie's studio, Bucharest* [Photograph].  
The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation
- Fig.10 Oliver, G. (1971) *Exterior of the Richard Demarco Gallery* [Photograph].  
The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation
- Fig.11 Cover of *Scottish International* (February 1973)  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.
- Fig.12 Tom McGrath's *Glasgow NuSpeak Third Eye Centre* freesheet  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.
- Fig.13 *The Third Eye Centre Bookshop* [Photograph]  
Cordelia and George Oliver Archive: Glasgow School of Art Archives
- Fig.14 Demarco, R. (1970) *Andre Thomkins palindrome* [Photograph]  
The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation
- Fig.15 Oliver, G. (1970) *Richard Demarco and Joseph Beuys* [Photograph]

The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation

Fig.16 Demarco, R. (1970) Joseph Beuys, *'The Pack', Strategy: Get Arts* at Edinburgh College of Art  
[Photograph] The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation

Fig.17 Demarco, R. (1978) *Sign for Edinburgh Arts '77* [Photograph]  
The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation

Fig.18 *The Artist as Explorer* by Richard Demarco  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.

Fig. 19 John Martin leaflet designs for The Traverse Festival Gallery, 1964 [Photograph].  
The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation

Fig. 20 Cover of *Sixteen Polish Artists* catalogue, 1967.  
The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation

Fig. 21 Cover of The Richard Demarco Gallery 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary catalogue, 1976  
The Demarco Digital Archive: The Demarco European Art Foundation

Fig.22 *Umbrella* July 1972 (A Demarco Gallery publication)  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.

Fig.23 *Umbrella* April 1972 (A Demarco Gallery publication)  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.

Fig.24 *Rocket*, No.8  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.

Fig.25 *Rocket*, No.10  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.

Fig.26 *Rocket*, No.4  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.

Fig.27 John Bellany and Alexander Moffat at the railings outside the RSA, 1964 [Photograph].  
Image courtesy Alexander Moffat

Fig.28 Cover of *Stigma* (Number 3, February 1983) [Photograph].  
Image courtesy Malcolm Dickson

Fig.29 Cover of *Variant*, Number 1, 1984 [Photograph]  
Image courtesy Malcolm Dickson

Fig.30 Cover of the *Edinburgh Review* Number 73  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.

- Fig.31 Cover of *Alba* (Summer, 1986)  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.
- Fig.32 Cover of *Alba* (Autumn, 1986)  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.
- Fig.33 Cover of *Variant* (Number 7, 1989) [Photograph]  
Image courtesy Malcolm Dickson
- Fig.34 Cover of *Variant* (Issue 11, Spring 1992) [Photograph]  
Image courtesy Malcolm Dickson
- Fig.35 Cover of leaflet for *Windfall '91*  
[Digitally reproduced from original] Collection of the author.
- Fig.36 Installation view of *Windfall '91* (work by Martin Boyce)  
[Digitally reproduced from catalogue] Collection of the author.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines art criticism and related forms of art writing produced by visual artists in Scotland between 1960 and 1990. The first section explores the work of a number of figures who were instrumental in establishing a body of critical writing on contemporary art in the 1960s and 1970s. This includes a detailed discussion and analysis of the broadsheet art criticism of Cordelia Oliver in the *Glasgow Herald*, *The Times* and *The Guardian*, an examination of the catalogue essays and ephemeral texts of Alexander Moffat, a discussion of the activities of Alan Bold and Robert Crozier for the small art magazine *Rocket* and a discussion of the role of Richard Demarco in publishing and commissioning new writing.

In particular, these early chapters attempt to establish why artists began to work simultaneously as artist and critic through a consideration of the critical climate for writing on art in Scotland in the period and through an examination of these artist-writers' relationships with art world infrastructures (as represented by institutions such as Edinburgh College of Art, the Royal Scottish Academy, the Scottish Arts Council and so on).

The second part of the thesis considers the period from 1980 to 1990, looking primarily at a group of Glasgow School of Art graduates involved in the publication of *Stigma* and *Variant* magazines. The writings of Malcolm Dickson and Ken Currie are analysed in detail, along with related texts by William Clark, Stewart Home and the *Edinburgh Review's* Peter Kravitz. Much of this section focuses on the critical divisions between artist-writers on the subject of New Image painting in the mid-1980s. This is followed by an analysis of shifts in mode, style and form in Scottish art criticism and art writing from the mid- to -late 1980s in the pages of *Variant*.

The final section considers the legacy of the writing discussed in the earlier chapters, looking at both the generational and socio-political shifts in approaches to art writing and criticism on the part of a later group of artist-writers, specifically the work of Ross Sinclair and his peers.



## INTRODUCTION: The Horse's Mouth

The historiography of modern art in Scotland should not be difficult to write – mainly because there are not many books on the subject (Stirton, 2007, p.40).

This research focuses on art criticism and related forms of art writing produced in Scotland by visual artists from 1960 to 1990. In his article 'Learning from Glasvegas: Scottish Art after "The 90"', the critic and writer Neil Mulholland claimed that recent Scottish art had been mythologised through major exhibitions rather than art history or criticism (Mulholland, 2002, p61). Likewise, writing of the scarcity of writing on art in Scotland in the twentieth century, art historian Paul Stirton noted that following a limited number of texts produced in the first decade of the century, 'the succeeding decades were padded out mostly with exhibition catalogues, pamphlets and critical essays' (Stirton, 2007, p.40). A key objective of this research is to give serious critical attention to this very 'padding' and argue for its value and significance as an important account of Scottish art and criticism. My thesis is that, taken together, the ephemeral texts, reviews, essays and magazine articles written by visual artists themselves between the 1960s and 1990s constitute a significant body of critical writing which offer a valuable though often overlooked historiography of art in Scotland 'from the horse's mouth'.

The research is not intended as a comprehensive survey of all the critical writing on art produced in this period. Rather, it is an attempt to analyse the development of critical writing on contemporary art in Scotland through a consideration of specific recurrent or persistent approaches particular to given artist-critics and the trends or idioms which defined the eras in which they practiced. By focusing on texts written by visual artists, the research considers the critical perspectives of 'those intimately involved with the work's production and reception' (Mulholland, 2003, p.10). Amongst these figures are Cordelia Oliver, Alexander Moffat, Malcolm Dickson, Ken Currie and Ross Sinclair.

Commenting on his research and collation of material for the *Art in Theory* series of readers, Charles Harrison has acknowledged that 'because we place a particular value on information from the horse's mouth [...] substantial writings by the actual producers themselves will always be sine qua non'

(Harrison, 2001, pp. 5-6). Almost all of the writing I consider here has been neither anthologised, republished or subject to scrutiny since its publication yet it stands as an important account of the issues and debates at the heart of modern and contemporary art in Scotland. Additionally, the perspectives and viewpoints contained in these texts are frequently absent from mainstream, academic and populist accounts of Scottish art. As well as providing a detailed examination of the critical climate for art and the infrastructure of the Scottish art world in the period considered, many of these writings can be seen today to offer a revisionist or alternative history of Scottish art, looking at the works of artists often excluded from dominant 'histories'. As the examples cited throughout the thesis demonstrate, these writings offer an authentic and revealing record of the trajectory of both visual art itself and critical writing on art in Scotland since the 1960s.

The figures at the centre of this research have all worked simultaneously as both artist and critic at certain points in their careers and their writings have frequently opposed or offered alternatives to conventional or dominant journalistic criticism in various ways. Some have done so by working with small, low or no-budget publications or through the production of samizdat magazines and journals. However, in some cases, it has been by virtue of the stylistic and literary forms they have adopted that artist-writers have distinguished their approach from mainstream art criticism or academic modes of writing on art. And whilst there *appears* to be little written on Scottish art in the twentieth century my assertion throughout this research is that such writing does, in fact, exist but that it has merely been less visible or accessible to a broad international readership than, for instance, the exhibitions and books cited by Stirton and Mulholland. As the research reveals, the conditions under which much of this writing has been produced, and the forms taken by the key publications I consider has often worked against their wider dissemination and longevity (for instance, much Scottish commentary and criticism of the last few decades has been published in ephemeral publications with relatively small distribution). Because of this, the research methods adopted in this thesis have often been dictated by the subject matter and availability of material. I have relied heavily on archival sources, for example, along with extensive primary research conducted with the artist-writers themselves. (I will return to a brief discussion of my research sources and methods at the close of this introduction.)

As well as attempting to provide a narrative arch tracing the emergence and development of a body of critical writing on art in Scotland since the 1960s the thesis identifies and examines other common features of the texts produced by these artist-critics. For example, the intense social and professional interconnectedness of the figures discussed has meant that they have frequently used their writing to discuss or evaluate the work of their associates, colleagues and peers (the sociological notion of social capital is apposite here - following Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, the term social capital is employed to suggest that social networks have value<sup>1</sup>). It has also been a tendency on the part of the artist-writers considered to examine visual art as part of a broader artistic culture, which in some cases reveals itself through an intensely interdisciplinary approach to the critique of visual art. In addition, the complexities involved in the decision to adopt the dual role of artist and critic has become a recurrent issue for the figures I discuss and this can be seen as another common feature linking an otherwise diverse range of texts.

## **The Artist as Critic**

A key focus of the research is the notion that by 'taking up the pen' the artist-critics discussed here have attempted to present a critical response to their own field, often commenting on the work of their contemporaries and frequently reflecting on their own practice in relation to broader shifts in visual art and culture. Not least, the research has found that some of the most interesting, persuasive, insightful and analytical criticism on contemporary Scottish art in this period has been produced by visual artists themselves rather than art historians, journalists or professional critics.

As Peter Suchin has noted:

[...] artists who have explicitly worked as critics, Laurie Anderson, Patrick Heron, Donald Judd and Adrian Searle are just a few examples [...] It is of course the case that many artists, whilst not claiming to be critics as such, have produced substantial bodies of written work. Some well-known twentieth century examples are Duchamp, Malevich, Mondrian, Schwitters, Smithson and Stella but there are many others (Suchin, 1998, p.7).

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term social capital as it is defined by the US political scientist Robert D. Putnam in his 1995 essay 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital' (Putnam, 1995).

In Britain today, there are numerous examples of critics and commentators who work simultaneously as artists, or who began their careers as practicing artists, such as Peter Suchin himself, Adrian Searle, Matthew Collings and J. J. Charlesworth. It is worth clarifying, however, exactly what I mean in the context of this research when I refer to the 'artist-writer' or 'artist-critic'. This can be illuminated by looking briefly at the historical models that prefigured the artist-writers examined in this research. In his 2001 book *Conceptual Art and Painting* Charles Harrison asked, 'What kind of category of writing is artists' writing, and how and why does it come to be accorded a significant status?'. In the same essay Harrison goes on to identify three subcategories of artists' writing: 'writing conceived as documentary accompaniment to artistic practice, writing conceived as literature, and writing conceived as art'(Harrison, 2001, p.3).

The artist-writers I consider in this research continue a long tradition of practitioners who have worked either concurrently, or at different junctures in their careers, as both artist and critic/writer on art. In some instances, the work of particular historical figures has been echoed in the texts of Scottish artist-writers, particularly in the attempts of certain figures to influence the interpretation of art through writing. For instance, Alexander Moffat has cited Delacroix's diaries as a major influence in his early decision to begin writing a journal as part of his studio practice and his later writings could be seen to follow in the tradition of artist-critics such as John Ruskin. This is most evident in relation to Moffat's role as a champion of certain groups of artists and artistic principles. Just as Ruskin came to be associated with the work of Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites, Moffat became connected with the artists at the centre of New Image painting in Scotland. Many of Cordelia Oliver's texts of the 1960s also acted as a form of critical advocacy. She was a staunch supporter of figurative painters from the west coast of Scotland, including a number of women artists whose work she felt needed more visibility.

Another art historical model which finds a later parallel in the texts considered here can be found in Alan Bold's texts on Scottish Realism in the 1960s and '70s. In many ways, Bold's essays can be seen as part of a legacy of early twentieth century Modernist manifestos, and the role of the poet as chronicler of artistic positions and principles (in the tradition of, for instance, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the Futurists, Hugo Ball and Dada or André Breton and Surrealism). There was an undoubtedly manifesto-like tone to the texts published by Bold in journals such as *Gambit* and *Rocket*. Like the manifestos of groups such as the Mexican Muralists, there was a clear sense that Bold's calls for a new form of

painting which would be relevant to and reflect life in modern Scotland were underpinned by firmly held political ideals. Likewise, whilst also firmly rooted in the expression of a political position, some of the texts produced by artist-writers such as Ken Currie in the 1980s also bear comparison with Whistler's riposte to Ruskin, in which the artist defends his position against critical attack. And though clearly motivated by different issues and politics, the aggressive energy and style of Malcolm Dickson's polemical essays of the 1980s could be seen as an inheritor of the rhetoric, shock and bombast of texts by groups such as the Futurists, Dada and the Vorticists. The specificities of the historical, socio-political and other factors underpinning the writings of these older historical examples would make it naïve to suggest that such groups are strictly analogous with the artist-writers at the centre this research, but they nevertheless serve to illustrate the taxonomy and history of artist's writings as a category and the way in which 'artists-who-write' have frequently referred to historical precursors as a legitimising framework for their writing practices.

As Charles Harrison has observed:

The great majority of artists' writings can be readily enough accommodated to the category of documentation [...] Artists' art criticism is something of a special case, but the more secure the author's identity as an artist, the more likely it is that any critical writing will be read with a view to that artist's work rather than to the work it explicitly addresses (Harrison, 2001, p.6).

The texts I consider in this research can be classified according to the three 'subcategories' identified by Harrison: artists' writings as documentation, literature or art. They are also frequently examples of artist's art criticism, the 'special case' described above. However, other, later writings are less easily defined, and the style and forms of texts, such as the 'creative plagiarism' seen in late 1980s issues of *Variant* magazine, could be seen as both literary *and* critical in the mode they adopt.

Historically, artists' writings in the public domain have often been concerned with the elucidation of the writer's own studio practice yet in the main the texts I consider do not seek specifically to operate in this capacity, nor could they be categorised as 'writing-as-art' in Harrison's taxonomy (the texts of Robert Smithson or the essays of Art & Language would be two such examples of 'writing-as-art'). In other words, the texts I discuss are not extended 'statements' or notes on the writer's own visual art written primarily to influence or clarify others' interpretations (such as the texts produced by artists such as Jeff

Wall, Donald Judd and Robert Morris, for example). It would be naive, however, not to recognise the potential of many of these texts to be regarded as oblique manifestos for Scottish Realism in the 1970s, New Image Painting in the 1980s or Scottish Neo-conceptualism in the 1990s. Certainly, the critical positions of the respective artist-writers in each era are abundantly reflected in their studio practices. In this respect, then, the texts by Moffat and Currie (or, equally, Oliver in the 1960s and Sinclair in the 1990s) could be seen, as per Harrison's categories, as 'documentary', and could be employed by later historians and critics as a way to contextualise and understand the visual art works of these writers.<sup>2</sup>

As Harrison has noted, critical writing by an artist will often be 'read with a view to that artist's work rather than to the work it explicitly addresses' (Harrison, 2001, p.6). For some of the figures I discuss a conflict has arisen between the two roles, leading to a situation in which one or the other type of practice has eventually taken precedence. For artist-critics such as Cordelia Oliver, for example, in spite of her repeated insistence on describing herself first and foremost as an artist, her career as a critic became dominant. Despite believing firmly that her critical approach was fundamentally informed by her understanding of art as a practitioner Oliver nevertheless began to see a conflict between the two practices, a belief which led to her decision to stop exhibiting art work publicly from the mid-1960s onwards. For artist-critics such as Ken Currie in the 1980s similar difficulties arose in terms of the reception of his writing when the publication of his essay on 'New Glasgow Painting' in 1986 generated heated written responses which specifically referred to Currie's visual art rather than the 'offending' text itself. The ensuing responses by Malcolm Dickson and others led to one of the fiercest critical battles ever seen in Scottish art writing. (I discuss this in depth in Chapter Three.)

## Critical Autonomy

In his essay 'The Recovery of Criticism', Michael Schreyach noted:

A conventional assumption about art criticism is that it mediates between the critic (a professional who produces specialised knowledge about artists and artworks) and a public that

---

<sup>2</sup> It should also be noted that, while it may not have been the primary motivation for these artists to begin writing, it would have been *gauche* if they had not been aware of the way in which, as Leanne Carroll has noted of Robert Morris, 'writing was a useful way to ensure that one stood out amongst artists producing similar works' (Carrell, 2008, p.8).

seeks to be educated or enlightened about a market of artistic or intellectual products. It serves an intermediary role, shuttling back and forth between two poles, illustrating aspects of art and arbitrating its economic and cultural value. Art criticism presents its objects to an audience, and in doing so is thought to be culturally relevant, to have a purpose and to fulfil a function. (Schreyach, 2008, p.17)

Schreyach's definition of criticism (or his description of its commonly understood function) tallies with the approach to critical writing taken by artist-critics such as Alexander Moffat and Cordelia Oliver in the 1960s and 1970s, and by Ken Currie in the 1980s but like many of their historical forebears, a major motivating factor for these artists to begin writing was their desire to by-pass the supposed division between the role of the artist and the 'professional' critic. As artist-critics, the figures I discuss have often knowingly sought to undermine the interlocution between artist and audience typically taken on by curators and critics. Indeed, several of the writers discussed here have explicitly acknowledged that their prime objective in writing about art was to 'educate the public' (Moffat, 2002). From the 1980s onwards, however, and increasingly from the late 1990s, new approaches to criticism (in a Scottish context) emerged. Much discourse around art in the 1980s (in the *Edinburgh Review*, for example) seemed to be less concerned with disseminating knowledge and analysis to 'the public' and more concerned with the development of a critical dialogue amongst artists themselves. Much criticism of this period, therefore, might be seen to have been written less to encourage or foster new audiences for art than to generate critical debate inside the art world in Scotland.

Through the production of unmediated responses to the issues and debates common to the art of their time (often against much resistance and opposition from fellow artists, as the accounts I discuss later reveal) the decision to begin writing on art was precipitated by the sense of urgency these artist-writers felt over the complacency and stasis they identified in the Scottish art world, particularly in the 1960s and '70s. The catalyst to begin writing, then, was the realisation that without their direct intervention the debates held to be so crucial by these artist-writers would not have taken place.

In 2004, Peter Suchin wrote of this development in a broader sense, noting:

In the 60s and 70s [...] artists challenged the then current subject positions of the artist, the critic and the curator. Boundaries between established categories were deliberately blurred, because the identities of such divisions were no longer either convincing or acceptable [...]. The

important point about artists becoming writers and curators in the 60s and 70s [...] is that the model of the inarticulate artist will no longer suffice. It is not up to the critic to think and theorise on others' behalf' (Suchin, 2004, p.13).

In Chapter Two Alexander Moffat is quoted as saying that his decision to begin writing was informed by a determination to oppose the anti-intellectualism of many contemporary artists in Scotland, who saw the 'jobs' of the artist and critic as mutually exclusive, separate spheres. Moffat sought to undermine this perception, and to contest 'the model of the inarticulate artist'. In the 1980s, Ken Currie echoed this stance, strongly influenced by Moffat's example. For Malcolm Dickson in the 1980s, and Ross Sinclair in the 1990s, there was a similar desire to cut out the middleman in order to 'eliminate a "secondariness" in the production, exhibition and writing of art [...] it was all about the creation of a culture without mediation' (Dickson, 2002). There is a keen sense, then, that the artist-critics I discuss in this thesis have been motivated by the desire to achieve a kind of critical autonomy. But this autonomy relates to more than a simply contestation of the perception of the 'inarticulate artist' or the rise of so-called 'DIY' culture. In a Scottish context, it is clear to see that for many of the figures discussed there was a simultaneous desire to present, in Kenneth Frampton's words, 'a kind of anti-centrist consensus – an aspiration at least to some form of cultural, economic and political independence' (Frampton, 1992, p.314). As Ross Sinclair has noted,

Often artists conspire to their own marginalisation by accepting projected views of the parameters of cultural activity, particularly in regional areas and of course by accepting and patronising the cultural hegemony enforced from the metropolitan centre (Sinclair, 1991).

Many of these artist-critics, therefore, sought to deal with critical issues on Scottish art within Scotland, rather than looking to the 'outside' for critical attention or cultural validation. This is not to say that these artist-critics were unaware of wider developments or critical contexts; on the contrary, the texts I discuss frequently acknowledge the historical, critical and international frames of reference within which their discussions operate. Similarly, numerous texts act as ambassadorial in their attempts to elevate the status and critical reception of Scottish art internationally (Cordelia Oliver's reviews are a key example here). In several cases, though, the texts I discuss present a specifically Scottish perspective on broader shifts in visual art practice, drawing attention to the distinct contexts from which Scottish art has emerged and highlighting the contribution of Scottish artists to wider trends in visual art. Oliver's



accounts of the move from traditional to expanded post-medium practices in the 1970s are one such example, as are the various viewpoints on the 'return' to figuration in painting in the 1980s in texts by Moffat, Currie and Dickson. In the 1990s, Ross Sinclair provides an incisive account of the role of artist-run initiatives and self-determination on the part of artists linked to the Scottish neo-conceptualism. In all of these examples, we can identify an attempt by these artist-critics to present an alternative to what Neil Mulholland has described as the 'London-centric' criticism of Scottish art.

## **The Scottishness of Scottish Art Writing**

Along with the desire for critical autonomy the research reflects on the possibility that there exists a distinctive Scottish character to some of the writing on art produced over the last few decades (the claim has certainly been made for Scottish visual art itself), that in some respects a uniquely Scottish outlook or perspective can be identified through reading Scottish art criticism within its specific national and historical contexts. Some of the factors I consider include the recognition that this writing has been produced by a nation which was a historic seat of Enlightenment discourse, a nation which has been innovative in its literary forms and which is internationally renowned for its fierce national and civic pride, frequently expressed in writing. Similarly, the distinct contexts and perspectives which could be seen to have informed much Scottish art writing include the acknowledgement that such writing, as I have outlined, has often been rooted in specific political ideology. Undoubtedly, the artist-writers I discuss have been based in a stateless nation which has been often been marginalised or regarded as peripheral by the centres of economic and political power in England.

The research also addresses the fact that almost all of the figures discussed could be seen as 'makaris', following the ancient Scots tradition of the 'makar', the writer-maker. In fact a great many Scottish commentators and critics pursued their practices in this manner. Alan Bold and Sydney Goodsir Smith, for example, were known primarily as poets but were also practicing artists. Edward Gage, art critic for *The Scotsman* in the 1960s and '70s, was also a painter. Their predecessors include artist-critics such as William McCance (art critic for *The Spectator* in the 1920s), J.D. Fergusson (whose *Modern Scottish Painting* was published in 1943) and Stanley Cursiter (author of *Scottish Art*, published in 1949) all of whom worked as both artist and critic at various points in their careers, despite (in these examples)

being known primarily as artists. This perhaps underpins another salient feature of the texts examined, namely, that Scotland's cultural producers have frequently represented the notion of the 'democratic intellect' in their various practices.<sup>3</sup> This concept has been manifested through a recurrently interdisciplinary approach to critical writing, both informed by and informing 'the arts' more broadly (this will be discussed in detail in relation to the work of Cordelia Oliver, Alexander Moffat and Malcolm Dickson). This is a particularly interesting approach to consider when examining art writing, such as that of Oliver and Moffat, which was produced in an era which, following Greenbergian formalist approaches, emphasised medium-specificity and the strict separation of disciplines.

Through an examination of the history of art criticism in Scotland across four decades, the research draws on a body of writing to explore how and why a nation with an extremely limited body of art criticism and art writing prior to the 1960s suddenly began to produce a sophisticated and significant commentary on its own cultural production. Whilst art criticism in Scotland is a young discipline, it has expanded hugely in both scale and scope since the 1970s, largely due to the writings produced by artists themselves. Rather than presenting (for example) an all-embracing history of Scottish criticism or a comparative study of Scottish criticism with the criticism of another 'small nation', though, the thesis aims to reflect wider issues about the role and function of art writing *through* a consideration of Scottish writing by artists as a case study.

The decision to consider art criticism and related forms of writing produced in Scotland was motivated by a number of factors (including many already mentioned) and several were largely pragmatic. Focusing on writing produced in Scotland immediately limited the sheer volume of texts for consideration and offered a way to narrow the field of enquiry on geographical terms. In looking at the art criticism of a relatively small nation it was possible to track its shifts and directions in close detail. The scale of the art 'community' in Scotland enabled me to gain ongoing access to research resources such as archives which are not in the public domain, unpublished or ephemeral texts and continuing dialogues with the critics and writers under scrutiny. The collation of primary sources has often been drawn from the artist-writers' personal collections (especially those of Cordelia Oliver, Alexander Moffat

---

<sup>3</sup> I refer here to George Davies' notion of the tendency towards a unified approach to knowledge in educational contexts and the development of a generalist tradition in academia as discussed in his 1961 book. See Davies, G. (1961) *The Democratic Intellect*, reprint, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000. Such approaches to knowledge are characterised by the works of Scots intellectuals and polymaths such as Patrick Geddes. The 'democratic intellect' has also been discussed by artist-writers such as Alexander Moffat, whose critical approach reflects this concept.

and Malcolm Dickson). Along with textual analysis of the texts themselves, much of the research has been underpinned by extended interviews with the figures discussed – those practitioners directly involved in Scottish art writing and criticism (with supporting interviews and research conducted with those involved in commissioning, publishing and editing ). With the exception of the late Alan Bold I have interviewed each artist-writer in depth. I have also made extensive use of new archives and collections such as the Richard Demarco Digital Archive, the newly established Cordelia and George Oliver Archive at Glasgow School of Art, and the use of material from Scottish libraries including Edinburgh College of Art library, Glasgow School of Art library, the Glasgow Room at the Mitchell Library (microfiche texts from the *Glasgow Herald* and the *Scotsman*) and Special Collections at the University of Glasgow. I have also frequently referred to material in digital archives such as the *Glasgow Herald* archive (both *The Herald* digital archive itself and texts accessed via Google News Archives) and the *Guardian* and *Times* digital archives.

Throughout the thesis I consider a range of types of writing on art, both in terms of form and approach. Platforms as diverse as UK-wide, broadsheet newspapers and major exhibition catalogues to small press or self-published ‘zines’ have been examined. Similarly, the forms of writing I have analysed range from reviews and catalogue essays through polemics and rhetoric to ‘critically creative’ writing. In terms of structure, the research has been ordered chronologically to give a sense of the shifts and developments which have occurred in Scottish art writing across the four decades considered. I begin by looking at the emergence of a body of art criticism in the 1960s through an analysis of the work of Cordelia Oliver. Oliver was rigorously self-reflexive in her approach to art criticism and as a result, her critical position is often made explicit in her reviews. Though not easily categorised, Oliver’s style of writing and her close attention to description as a crucial element of evaluation aids an analysis of her writing in terms of situating it within a broader critical context. For Oliver, her role as a critic was ‘traditional’ in the sense that she regarded the critic’s job as primarily to evaluate, interpret and act as an arbiter of taste, a perception of the function of criticism which finds parallels in much Modernist criticism of the period (I discuss this further in Chapter One). Unlike the other figures examined, Oliver was one of the few artists who established a career as an art critic for a number of respected broadsheets and as such, she (along with Moffat) is one of the few artist-critics considered here whose name became known outside Scotland. Together with her magazine articles and catalogue essays, Oliver’s critical writing for *The Guardian* in particular is hugely significant in tracing both a history of Scottish art criticism and Scottish

art itself. In addition, Oliver is significant in being one of very few women writers in the period, and the only one discussed at length in this thesis. In Chapter Two I look at the circle of writers around Alexander Moffat, from the texts written by Robert Crozier and Alan Bold in the samizdat *Rocket* magazine to Moffat's own prolific output in the form of catalogue essays, the primary platform for Moffat's writing. Bold, Moffat and Oliver are clear examples of what is often regarded as one of the primary functions of the critic – that of supporter and champion of artists.

The move from the 1960s and 1970s to a new generation of artist-writers in the 1980s highlights a distinct shift in approach to the role and function of writing, as well as revealing a new interest in experimental forms and styles of writing not seen in art writing of the previous decades. The work of Malcolm Dickson, Ken Currie and the group of artist-writers centred on *Stigma* and *Variant* magazines represented a generational shift at odds with the approach, tone and attitude of earlier writers such as Moffat, Oliver and Demarco and is considered in detail in Chapter Three. Firstly, and most visibly, the style of writing in particular is markedly different in texts by Dickson and his peers, with an irreverent use of language rarely encountered in art writing up to this point. For almost all the younger artist-critics in the 1980s, the texts are also distinguished by increasingly overt and explicit discussion of the socio-political context of art. *Variant* in particular became an important forum for the publication of new forms of writing which prefigured developments in art criticism and art writing in the 1990s and for this reason it forms a major element of this research in the latter part of the thesis. Chapter Four examines the legacy of the development of art writing produced since the 1960s in Scotland, looking primarily at texts written by the artist Ross Sinclair. The chapter concludes with a short discussion of the emerging critical trends which appeared from the mid-1990s onwards. Though seemingly representative of 'post-critical' approaches to art writing, some of the features of these later texts can be seen to have been anticipated by earlier figures such as Dickson and Sinclair.

My intention throughout the thesis has been to emphasise that an examination of these writings is a way of identifying the ways in which art theory and criticism in Scotland both reflected and responded to broader Anglophone critical shifts. It is also a means of understanding the crucial generative nature of art writing in establishing an internationally renowned ecology of artistic practice in Scotland.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Finding a Voice: Cordelia Oliver, Richard Demarco and Scottish Art Writing from the '60s**

This chapter concentrates on art criticism and related forms of art writing from the 1960s onwards. My intention here is not to provide a comprehensive or exhaustive survey of criticism in this period but to chart the emergence of the necessary conditions for writing on art in Scotland to move away from the *belles-lettres* tradition dominating commentary on art at that time.<sup>4</sup>

The writings of Cordelia Oliver and Richard Demarco in this chapter, and of Robert Crozier and Alexander Moffat in Chapter Two have been selected in order to reflect a range of approaches and concerns for artist-critics in Scotland in the 1960s and 1970s across a range of media (catalogues, self-published leaflets, newspaper reviews and so on). Before considering each figure in detail, the following pages present a contextual overview of the attitudes and events which, both directly and indirectly, can be seen to have informed critical approaches and perspectives on art writing in the period.

Where it existed at all, writing on art in Scotland in the 1960s and '70s remained staunchly in the tradition of the 'man of letters' or enthusiastic amateur mode of criticality, most visible in broadsheets such as the *Glasgow Herald* and *The Scotsman*. There were no dedicated visual art publications, and the wider British press rarely covered art produced in Scotland. Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries Scottish artists had historically moved elsewhere in order to attract art world attention and it would be reasonable to claim that in the 1970s critical debate on contemporary art practice in Scotland (outside the journalistic review or gallery 'round-up') was almost non-existent in terms of published writing.

Clearly there had been attempts to trace the development of Scottish art by art historians and writers such as John Tonge, Stanley Cursiter and James Caw in the first few decades of the twentieth century,

---

<sup>4</sup> This *belles-lettres* mode of writing is exemplified by the largely deferential, celebratory coverage of exhibitions in editorials and in reviews by writers such as the *Glasgow Herald's* art critic Alex Sturrock. Such journalistic writing was often 'chatty' or 'breezy' in style and tended towards a 'who's who' kind of reportage and description rather than critical analysis.

but these were limited in length and scope and focused on tracing a history of art in Scotland (as opposed to discussing contemporary Scottish art).<sup>5</sup>

Writing of the decades leading up to the period covered by the research in his book *The Modern Scot*, the art historian Tom Normand noted that:

The very foundation of radical avant-garde activity was absent. This absence was shaped by a temperamental disinclination for Scottish artists to engage in theory, and the all-encompassing dominance of art institutions in Scottish cultural life. In these respects most attempts to generate a discourse on art through manifestoes and journals collapsed upon their instigation. (Normand, 2000, p.5)

The resulting absence of discourse on art amongst artists between the 1930s and 1950s (as discussed by Normand) remained relatively unchanged by the start of the 1960s. But in spite of the dearth of serious critical debate, changes were slowly occurring within the Scottish art world of the 1960s and '70s which reflected broader societal and cultural shifts. The prevailing view up to and into the 1970s amongst the more progressive quarters of the Scottish scene, however, was that the infrastructure of Scottish art was in crisis. Contemporary Scottish art (and its attendant criticism) was seen as at best staid and reactionary, at worst derivative and moribund. For the most part (with some notable exceptions, of course, such as those discussed in Normand's book, the 'isms' of Modernism developing in Europe and the US were taken on board in Scotland in their most diluted form. As the art historian Bill Hare acknowledged in his book *Contemporary Painting in Scotland* 'throughout 20<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish art (painting and sculpture) there has been a tint of French Fauvism, a stroke of German Expressionism and a later dash of Abstract Expressionism' (Hare, 1992, p.9).

Much 'contemporary' art, then, was a pastiche of radical work from elsewhere which appropriated the 'look' of the avant-garde but left out the innovative vision, the originality and the radicalism of approach (not to mention the manifestoes, texts and published accounts of such developments). According to Hare (1992, p.9), this kind of painting had a 'stranglehold' on the Royal Scottish Academy, the four

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, James L. Caw's *Scottish Painting, Past and Present, 1620 -1908*, Edinburgh: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1908; John Tonge's *The Arts of Scotland*, London, 1938, cited by Hugh Macdiarmid amongst others in later writings; Ian Finlay's *Art in Scotland*, Oxford, 1948; and Stanley Cursiter's *Scottish Art*, London, 1949. A detailed discussion of the discourse on Scottish art in this period can again be found in chapter five of Tom Normand's book *The Modern Scot*.

Scottish art schools and the commercial gallery system which continued to dominate and stultify the art scene in Scotland for most of the twentieth century until the 1960s. In contrast to much Scottish painting today, little of the work of the Colourists or the later Edinburgh School took up the challenge of modern art as a dynamic vehicle for critical engagement with contemporary concerns (however it may have been historicised since).

The Scottish artists who had contributed to the development of British Modernism in the early decades of the twentieth century (William McCance, Robert Colquhoun, Robert Macbryde, for example) had done so from outside the country and it was believed that an artist with serious ambitions to further their art within a wider international context had to move elsewhere in order to do so (a view which largely prevailed until the mid- to late 1980s, as discussed in Alexander Moffat's *Edinburgh Review* essay 'Artists in Exile'). Typically, though, the dogged conservatism on the part of the establishment (the Royal Scottish Academy in particular) acted as the catalyst for younger artists to voice their dissent. Two of these young artists were Robert Crozier and Alexander Moffat, whose 'dissenting voices' will be considered later.

When compared with the healthy critical debate which was taking place in other areas of the arts in Scotland, principally literature, it was little wonder that young Scottish artists were so frustrated by the lack of debate and critical dialogue. Indirectly, however, these broader developments would eventually prove to be fruitful for shifts in visual art and criticism as 'cultural ambassadors' from across the sectors of literature, theatre and performance began to associate and collaborate.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> I am not suggesting here that the connection between different art forms and cultural spheres was a new development in Scotland, but rather, in terms of contemporary art and writing about visual art, the collaborative ventures which flourished in the mid - late 1960s and into the '70s enabled these crossovers to become much more prolific and visible.



Fig.1 Demarco, R. (1959)

*Jim Haynes' Paperback Bookshop*

In 1962 the Director of the Edinburgh Festival, Lord Harewood, approved a proposal by John Calder and Jim Haynes to organise a Writers Festival. Calder was a Scots-Canadian publisher and art patron whose publishing company, established in 1949, specialised in the publication of experimental, radical and counter-culture literature (including works such as William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and Hubert Selby Jr's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*). Haynes had settled in Edinburgh in 1956 after serving in the US Army. After studying at Edinburgh University he opened the Paperback Bookshop in 1959. The venue quickly became a centre for impromptu poetry readings, discussions and performances.<sup>7</sup> The Paperback Bookshop, and more particularly the opportunity for the meetings and collaborative projects it provided, also marked the beginning of Richard Demarco's association with Haynes and the start of his curatorial and publishing enterprises, which will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

Calder and Haynes (together with Sonia Orwell) invited both established and marginal figures to discuss the conference theme 'The Novel Today'. Amongst many others, notable attendees included William Burroughs (whose reputation and career was said to be 'launched' by his participation in the conference), Norman Mailer, Colin MacInnes, Henry Miller, Alexander Trocchi and Hugh MacDiarmid. While literary events such as the International Writers Conference and the 1963 Drama Conference in

---

<sup>7</sup> In 1966 Haynes went on to be a founding member of *International Times* (later titled IT) which, along with London's *Oz* and Amsterdam-based *SUCK* (another Haynes co-production), became one of the most significant journals of '60s 'underground' culture.



Edinburgh became part of the mythology of the '60s in Scotland, they are also regarded as defining moments in Scottish culture. The public spat between Trocchi and MacDiarmid (in which MacDiarmid referred to Trocchi as 'cosmopolitan scum') has been described by Edwin Morgan as 'an unplanned happening not unlike the planned "happenings" of the time' (Morgan, 2002), while the 1963 Drama Conference featured 'Happenings' by Allan Kaprow, Mark Boyle and Charles Lawson.

The event, conceived and directed by Ken Dewey, became the subject of the afternoon's debate. For the first time since it had begun, that staid old conference with its dour Scottish squares and frumpy litterateurs was bristling with feeling. The majority, led by an incensed Ken Tynan (hurling words like 'totalitarian' and 'apocalyptic'), deplored the interruption ... Alexander Trocchi spat the word 'Dada' back into Tynan's face and exclaimed that critics could not simply explain away new forces in art by bundling them into ready-made classifications (Marowitz, 1963).

Despite the fact that the Happenings occurred within the scope of a Drama Conference it was clear that the boundaries between various artistic disciplines (visual art and performance in particular) were being challenged or blurred. Yet these developments seemed to go unnoticed (or studiously ignored) by key figures in the visual art community (such as senior members of the Royal Scottish Academy and the Scottish art schools including Robin Philipson, William MacTaggart, William Gillies and John Maxwell). In contrast to the vibrant literary and theatre scene, the aggressively parochial and insular attitude of the institutional and organisational infrastructure of Scottish art appeared increasingly myopic to younger generations of emerging Scottish artists. The only alternative, it seemed, was to forget about validation from these quarters and adopt a stance of self-determination.

In terms of 'the establishment', a key moment in the making and reception of contemporary art was the opening of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh in 1960, which aimed to lend gravitas and status to modern art which the general public in Scotland had previously been reluctant to acknowledge. Whether or not this objective was entirely successful in the 1960s is debatable, but modern and contemporary art was at least being exhibited in an 'official' capacity outside the commercial and academic sector.

In spite of institutions such as the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art and the creation of the Scottish Arts Council in 1967, the onus, it seemed, was on the producers of art themselves to both

provide and support their own critical dialogue. In the context of this research in particular, the late 1960s and 1970s in Scotland could be said to have been characterised by a self-reliant attitude towards all aspects of critical writing, curatorial practice and the production of art itself. Where mainstream or institutionally sanctioned criticism existed, it did so in an extremely limited form and always existed in the shadow of the other arts in Scotland (particularly theatre and literature). Would-be critics, curators and artists, rather than looking to official sources, often resorted to a reliance on peer critique and support. Social capital and the collaborations between practitioners, facilitators and enthusiasts undoubtedly became the most significant factor in the generation of projects, ideas, exhibitions and publications in this period. The interconnectedness of the key figures I discuss in this section provides ample evidence of the need and reliance upon social connections between critics, curators and artists who sought change in the Scottish art world. In a relatively small country, and an even smaller 'art world', the heightened emphasis on friendship and social relationships (as opposed to formal, professional or official connections) as the basis for commissioning and participation is perhaps unavoidable. What is certain is that 'social capital' (inevitably and accurately regarded as a closed, elite circle in some instances) has continued to be one of the most visible and pertinent aspects of critical writing in Scotland, from the 1960s to the present. Since the 1980s accusations of cronyism due to the intense interconnectedness of art world figures in Scotland has dogged discussions regarding the perceived 'criticality' of writing on art (the debate in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review* surrounding New Image painting in the mid-1980s is a prime example, discussed later in this thesis). From this standpoint, the late 1960s and 1970s can be seen as a relatively halcyon period for critics and writers in that they were rarely interrogated (or interrogative) on the basis of their perceived allegiances. Perhaps as a result of this, the writing of this period often betrays an unselfconscious enthusiasm and sense of optimism.

While there is an undeniable intellectual engagement in the work of the writers whose work I will go on to consider here, there is less a sense of the theoretical rigour, overtly politicised language or academism which would characterise much art writing in the late 1970s and 1980s, writing informed by the rise of postmodern theory, Visual and Cultural Studies approaches and the New Art History. By this, I mean that the writings of critics such as Cordelia Oliver and Richard Demarco, whilst undeniably left-leaning, are not underpinned by an explicit theoretical position or framework which can be seen to subscribe to or promote a single-issue agenda (by this I am referring to the 'capital letters' prefixes

attached to the Feminist, Marxist, Post-structuralist or Psychoanalytic positions adopted by many later writers of the late 1970s and 1980s). The exception to this can be seen in the polemical writings of Alan Bold, Alexander Moffat and Robert Crozier, whose application of a Marxist reading of art is clearly expressed (discussed in the next chapter).

The following chapter considers the work of Cordelia Oliver and Richard Demarco, two of the key figures in Scottish art and criticism from the mid-1960s onwards. The connections between these artist-writers clearly demonstrate the role played by social capital in the production and dissemination of art writing in Scotland. Indeed, the work of all five figures discussed in chapters one and two can be seen as representative of the character and state of criticism in 1960s and '70s Scotland. Similarly, the writing of all five (Oliver, Demarco, Moffat, Crozier and Bold), but particularly Oliver and Moffat, can be seen as marking a transitional phase in Scottish art criticism in terms of their role in generating a critical mass of artist-writers which would grow exponentially in the decades that followed. The difficulty of assessing Scottish criticism in the 1960s is that this writing represented the first substantial body of contemporary criticism on Scottish visual art to be published regularly in Scotland and beyond. As such, Moffat's, Demarco's and Oliver's commitment to Scottish art suffered from the danger of becoming entangled in the double-bind of being committed to local and national audiences in Scotland whilst also attempting to frame this culture and represent it on an international platform. In other words, the critical intention of these artist-writers was to serve and represent a local audience whilst maintaining a relevance to larger audiences outside Scotland, audiences who would be unfamiliar with the nuances and contexts of Scottish visual art and its infrastructure.

In terms of the affinities between these artist-writers, four key objectives stand out: to 'cut out the middle-man' by writing and representing artists as practising artists themselves; to represent art practices located beyond the establishment; to elevate the status of Scottish art *through* writing at home and abroad; and to consider visual art as part of a broader artistic culture in Scotland.

In 2003 John Bellany claimed that 'in Scotland you can't split up the arts because it's music, painting, sculpture and literature together. They reflect and borrow from each other' (Bellany, 2003, p.48). Similarly, writing in 2008, Richard Demarco highlighted that 'Cordelia Oliver personifies the attitude of the European artists and art experts who would regard as inseparable the worlds of the visual arts and the performing arts – and indeed the world of literature' (Demarco, 2008, p.42). The same could be said

of Demarco himself, along with Moffat, Bold and Crozier, and this approach is frequently manifested in their writings on visual art. Perhaps more than any other feature, it is this determination to consider broader contexts for visual art (as one aspect of a multi-faceted culture) which characterises the texts I consider in this period and distinguishes it from the dominant critical modes prevalent in the broader Anglophone criticism. In the US, the prevailing dogma on art and criticism was exemplified by Clement Greenberg's insistence on medium-specific purity, the separation of disciplines and his unswerving commitment to formalist analysis and the 'autonomy of the object'.<sup>8</sup> Greenberg's (along with fellow formalists such as Michael Fried) reductive reading of art, divorced from its contexts, would have been at odds with that of Moffat, Demarco and Oliver, whose writing celebrated the interconnectedness of the arts in Scotland, again reflecting Davies' concept of the Scots tendency of the 'democratic intellect'.

Finally, it should be noted that while the structure and approach of the thesis changes from chapter to chapter, this in itself reflects the changing nature of approaches to art writing in Scotland and the evolving climate for criticism generated by figures such as Moffat, Bold, Crozier, Demarco and Oliver. The following sections on Oliver and Demarco, for example, are notably more 'critically biographical' in their approach than the subsequent discussions of Malcolm Dickson and Ken Currie in the 1980s. This is intended to emphasise that at the time Oliver began writing she was working almost in a critical vacuum. There were so few critics, and far less artist-critics, writing in Scotland at the time of Oliver's writing for the *Glasgow Herald*, *the Times* and *the Guardian* that her views remained largely uncontested, at least in print. While Oliver undoubtedly made enemies as a result of her unflinching critical voice, then, this discontent was rarely expressed in writing. This stands in stark contrast to the critical climate in which Dickson and Currie were writing by the 1980s. In this sense, then, the following chapter has been organised as a broadly chronological discussion of Oliver's and Demarco's often intertwined careers in an attempt to track and trace the emergence of a body of critical writing by artists in Scotland. In brief, I suggest that it is as a result of the work of figures such as Oliver (in terms of writing itself) and Demarco (in publishing and commissioning writing) that later writers such as Dickson and Currie were able to enter into critical dialogue and debate.

---

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting" of 1961 and Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" of 1967. Both essays became seminal Modernist texts which dominated readings of American art in the period. Greenberg's influence on American art was such that he was parodied in Tom Wolfe's 1975 book 'The Painted Word' as one of the 'kings of Cultureberg'.

## CORDELIA OLIVER

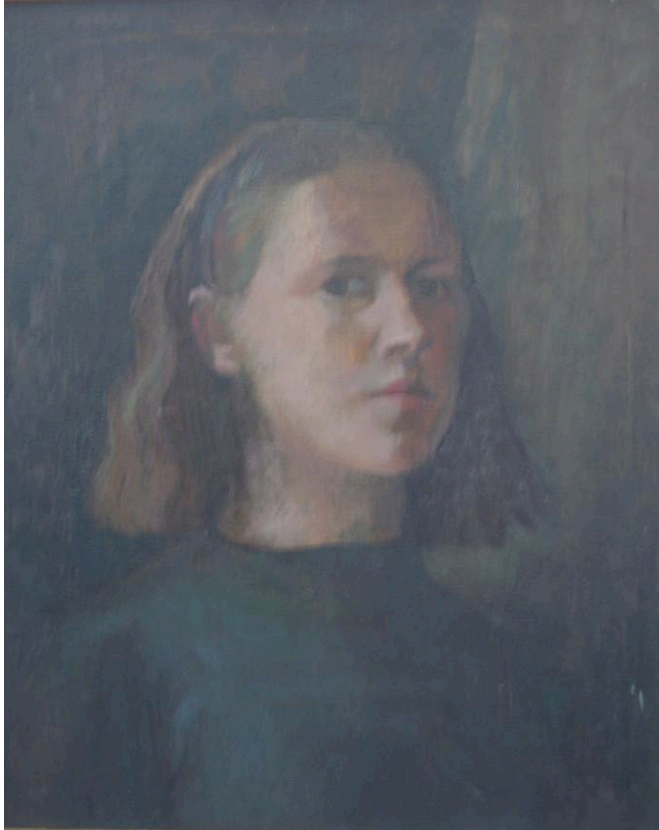


Fig.2 *Guthrie Award self-portrait*,  
Cordelia Oliver (1944)

Like many of the writers who form the focus of this research, Cordelia Oliver's role in Scotland's cultural life was rich and diverse. From her years as a student at Glasgow School of Art in the 1940s until her death in 2009 Oliver contributed to the arts in Scotland to an almost unparalleled degree in terms of influence, participation and longevity. Although the focus on Oliver is intended as a representative case study of criticism in the period I have selected her writing specifically for the following reasons. In her writing from the late 1950s until shortly before her death, Oliver was one of the most prolific and outspoken commentators on Scottish visual and performing arts. Her commitment to developing discourse on contemporary art in Scotland (and for a broader UK audience) cements her position as one of the most significant Scottish art critics of the twentieth century. Oliver's critical output and her close association and support for the more progressive figures in the Scottish art world was key to the sense

of momentum and confidence within Scottish art which had taken so long to flourish in the years leading up to the mid-1960s and she became a powerful advocate of artists from the West of Scotland (in defiance of Edinburgh's hegemony), and for innovative curators such as Richard Demarco. In addition, Oliver stands as one of extremely few female voices in critical writing in Scotland (even today) and though never approaching criticism from an expressly feminist perspective her support of women artists is worthy of note.

In common with many of the figures considered in this chapter, Cordelia Oliver was art school educated and identified herself first and foremost as an artist. Yet, like Richard Demarco, Alexander Moffat and others, Oliver maintained an interest in visual art as just one aspect of a broader artistic culture in Scotland. Indeed, for many visual artists and writers in Scotland in the 1950s and '60s the development of postmodern discourse surrounding issues of interdisciplinarity in the late '70s and early '80s must have seemed anachronistic given that their approach – in both practice and theory – had long been to consider the links between visual art, literature, theatre and music as overlapping, complementary, discursive and inter-related.

In Oliver's criticism, as I shall discuss, the parallels she identified between the arts made for an unusually perceptive and fertile body of writing, particularly in terms of traditional journalistic modes of enquiry. The issues which were important to Oliver found a recurring place in her writing, and the examples which follow attempt to highlight these themes. More than any other feature, Oliver's writing is very much the product of her training and background as an artist. Her position of 'artist-as-critic' is frequently revealed, sometimes through her close attention to formal and technical processes in drawing and painting and, more so, through her repeated references to her background and open acknowledgement that she commented on art from the perspective of a practising artist. For Oliver, this dual position created both a personal and professional conflict of interest which she never successfully resolved in terms of her career (even in her 80s she regularly made mention of her divided loyalties between the paths of criticism and artist).<sup>9</sup> Arguably, however, it was this very conflict which allowed for Oliver's continued self-reflexivity in her writing. There are numerous examples (discussed further in this

---

<sup>9</sup> Oliver's sentiments in relation to this division echo those of many artist-turned-critics. In many cases artists who work simultaneously as critics, curators or academics find that one of these roles eventually takes precedence or becomes the role by which they are publicly identified. The critic Adrian Searle, for example, has acknowledged that he was 'always torn between making art and writing. Writing won.' (Searle in Buck, 2000, p.224).

section) which highlight the seriousness with which Oliver viewed her role and responsibility as a critic and the function of criticism in a broader sense.

Along with Oliver's definition of herself as an artist-critic (and the role of artist always prefixed that of the critic), her career as a critic and participant in other branches of the arts in Scotland also offered a freshness of approach and perspective to her visual arts criticism. Again, her personal history and background become apparent in some of the characteristics of her writing – notably, in her tendency to draw parallels between art forms, and her involvement and commitment to 'the arts' as a holistic, coherent culture. Her involvement in the performing arts – theatre and opera in particular – is reflected in her critical approach to new forms of visual art practice in the 1970s, specifically through her critical support of projects and events initiated by Richard Demarco. In short, Oliver can be seen as frequently adopting an interdisciplinary approach to her criticism through her ability and desire to treat the arts as dialogic rather than discipline-specific. Oliver's desire to see Scottish culture as inter-related and complementary was shared by the other key figures I have chosen to focus on as representative of an emerging body of critical writing in the 1960s and '70s, such as Demarco and Moffat. It was their insistence on understanding the arts in Scotland in a broader international and cultural context which distinguished their writings and publications from many of their contemporaries. Again, I will discuss these examples in greater depth later in this chapter.

In addition to Oliver's critical interdisciplinarity and the fact that her writing can be seen to have been clearly informed by artistic practice and experience, two other factors are worthy of note in evaluating Oliver's contribution to the development of a body of art criticism in Scotland in the period considered – her loyalty to her home city, Glasgow, and her almost unique position as a female art critic in Scotland.

Although often indirect or implied, clues can be identified in Oliver's writing which reveal her geographical allegiances beyond simply acting as a champion for Scottish art and culture. While Oliver was immersed in the arts in Scotland and lived in Scotland almost all of her life, she was, like Demarco and Moffat, internationalist in her perspective, and sought to situate Scottish art within a broader, international framework rather than seeking merely to elevate the status of Scottish art for the sake of a narrowly conceived nationalism (or 'in opposition' to English art and culture). Her allegiances, rather, were firmly rooted in Glasgow. Friends and associates of Oliver's recall her oft-repeated insistence that some of the most significant aspects of the Edinburgh Festival originated in Glasgow. Similarly, when

issues of funding were raised in which the two cities were pitched against one another, Oliver was fierce in her defence of Glasgow as a worthy contender to Edinburgh's self-appointed role as the ambassador and guardian of Scottish culture.

Clearly, these views could be dismissed as the stereotypical West Coast of Scotland antagonism towards the capital, the resentment on the part of Glasgow that Edinburgh – largely because of the Festival – was regarded as the place in which contemporary Scottish culture could be 'found'. In the context of visual art, however, Oliver's views – particularly in the 1960s and '70s – were valid. While, of course, artistic production continued unabated in Glasgow, Edinburgh, as the seat of the Royal Scottish Academy (RSA), was undoubtedly the nexus of power in terms of art world infrastructure in Scotland. The close connections between Edinburgh College of Art and the RSA in the decades following World War Two, along with Edinburgh's role as the home of the National Galleries (including the newly opened Gallery of Modern Art) and the Scottish Arts Council, the main funding body for visual art in Scotland, increased the capital's power base, dominating the production and reception of visual art. Despite the city's vastly larger scale and population, Glasgow's reputation as the centre of Scottish contemporary art production and display would not rival Edinburgh until the 1980s (though interestingly, the Edinburgh-based Alexander Moffat would play a key role in this revival of interest in art from Glasgow). It is interesting, then, to consider Oliver's continued efforts to represent Glasgow art and artists on an equal footing with their Edinburgh counterparts.

This approach was also apparent in Oliver's support of women artists. Though she rarely made direct reference to the social or political position of women, or women artists, it seems clear that, like her championing of Glasgow artists, she believed the most productive action she could take in attempting to establish a 'level playing field' for women artists was not to discuss their gender or attempt to read the work of women artists from a feminist perspective, but simply to ensure they received the critical attention they deserved through her coverage of their work. In other words, Oliver worked quietly to ensure that women artists she admired were granted the visibility and recognition that was often denied to them in the art world.

Oliver's writing frequently referenced her background and experience in the arts, a personal history which undoubtedly informed her critical principles and the rhetorical features of her work. As Giles Sutherland's obituary noted:



Oliver's trademark style [...] usually placed herself and her opinion firmly at the centre of the piece. Her writing, not without humour, was also informed by personal experience, careful consideration, and, often, strong emotion. (Sutherland, 2010).

The 'personal experience' Sutherland refers to is present in much of Oliver's writing, informing her critical approach and writing style both directly and indirectly. As such, Oliver's life and criticism are tightly interwoven and for that reason it is salient to discuss Oliver's background before looking in detail at particular texts which exemplify the issues highlighted above. This first section, however, which outlines the key events leading up to the beginning of Oliver's career as a critic, abundantly highlights the most significant aspect of her critical approach and the feature of her writing which I identify above as being key to an understanding of her work – Oliver's simultaneous role as an artist and critic.

Cordelia McIntyre Patrick enrolled at Glasgow School of Art in 1940 and excelled at her studies throughout the course of her diploma. She was awarded the Guthrie Prize for her self-portrait in 1944. Like many of her contemporaries, Oliver had a fervent belief in the value of education and frequently referred to her own in conversation and writing (Oliver, 2002). She was generous in her acknowledgement of the role former teachers had played in her career and, in some respects, the scarcity of students and staff at Glasgow School of Art in the early 1940s due to conscription led almost to a kind of atelier system which served to intensify the student experience (Hartley, 1989, p.24).

For Oliver, the fact she had studied under Hugh Adam Crawford particularly validated her art school training, and she took pride in having been one of his favoured students. In early reviews Crawford is singled out for particular praise and it seems to have been Crawford's influence and encouragement of Oliver's student work which fostered her commitment to draughtsmanship above all else. Crawford was described by Oliver as an 'outstanding' and 'inspired teacher' (Oliver, 2001, p.20) and, even in 2006, in a press release for her exhibition of Festival Drawings at Glasgow School of Art, Oliver remained staunchly supportive of her mentor, attributing her early successes directly to her art school training and Crawford's inspirational pedagogical approach (Oliver, 2006a).



Fig.3 Cordelia Oliver at Glasgow School of Art, 1944 [Photograph]

In the summer of 1944, after leaving Glasgow School of Art, Oliver was selected to attend the annual summer school at Hospitalfield House in Arbroath, where she studied under James Cowie, also described as an ‘inspiring’ teacher (Oliver, 2001, p.24).<sup>10</sup> Like Demarco, Crozier and Moffat, Oliver

---

<sup>10</sup> Oliver was not alone in her admiration for these figures – Roger Bristow’s recent biography of Robert Colquhoun and Robert Macbryde similarly attributes their early successes to the encouragement and support the artists received at Glasgow School of Art. Almost four decades later Oliver was commissioned to write a critical biography of Cowie for the University Press Edinburgh’s *Modern Scottish Painters* series. In the preface she wrote:

‘The Cowie I knew as a teacher with whom, more than occasionally, I agreed to differ, but on whose mordant, not to say opinionated mind I honed the edge of my own intellect, such as it is, and for whose artistic integrity I came to have a sincere respect.’ (Oliver, 1980, preface).

worked as an art teacher after graduation before pursuing other career paths in criticism and curating. After the completion of her teacher training Oliver worked full-time as a teacher at Craigholme Girls' School between 1945 and 1948 and alongside her 'day job' she continued to teach life-drawing at evening classes in Glasgow School of Art, a position she had held since before her graduation.

In many respects Oliver's art criticism, like Moffat's, bears the hallmark of an educator. Regardless of audience, publication or subject, Oliver's writing – particularly her art criticism – was consistently elucidatory, providing context and background to whatever subject she discussed yet simultaneously avoiding over-simplification. Whilst there were indications of an emerging, distinctive voice and a clear set of critical principles, Oliver's writing style is notable for its remarkable clarity and lucidity. Her precise, measured use of language articulated a desire to communicate rather than obfuscate or confound. Even when the subjects she dealt with were, by their nature, complex or abstruse, Oliver's prose was never verbose or laden with jargon, a quality which in itself demonstrated her flair for language and the written word.

As an artist, Oliver pursued her own practice from her studio at 65 West Regent Street until her marriage to fellow GSA graduate George Oliver in summer 1948. After their marriage, the couple moved to London for two years, during which time Cordelia Oliver continued to paint (she exhibited work at the Royal Glasgow Institute in 1948 and was a professional member of the Society of Scottish Artists), before returning to Scotland in 1950. The real genesis of Oliver's move from teaching to writing, however, began with her work as a commercial artist in Edinburgh between 1950 and 1958. Whilst she continued to exhibit (at the RSA and RGI), it was through George Oliver's work as a photographer that Cordelia Oliver began her career in journalism and criticism.

George Oliver had been appointed Art Editor of the Edinburgh-based Scotland's *SMT* Magazine and through his position, and his freelance work for other publications, he arranged press tickets for the couple to attend rehearsals along with other press photographers. Whilst George Oliver made photographs, Cordelia Oliver recorded the actors, musicians, dancers and singers in drawings – simple, swiftly executed sketches of the performers in action. George proved instrumental in providing access to exclusive press views and rehearsals, while a friend, Ann Donaldson, facilitated the publication of Oliver's drawings in the pages of the *Glasgow Herald*. In the early 1950s Donaldson held an editorial position with the *Glasgow Herald's* Saturday page and gained permission to publish Oliver's drawings as

the accompanying illustrations for reviews and listings. Oliver's initial forays into broadsheet publishing, then, came not through writing, but through the publication of her drawings of theatre and performance at the Edinburgh Festival under her maiden name, Cordelia Patrick.

The roots of Oliver's interest in theatre had begun while she was a student at Glasgow School of Art. In her time outside art school Oliver spent evenings making drawings of performers backstage at theatre rehearsals at venues such as the Citizens Theatre, the Unity Theatre and The Park Theatre Club (Oliver, 2001). As well as her response to theatre and music as an artist, Oliver had long enjoyed the performing arts as both audience and participant. She was a member of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir between 1944 and 1947 and, as an award-winning soloist, performed at the Glasgow Music Festival. She was also a member of the Phoenix Choir and performed at the first Edinburgh International Festival in 1947. In accounts of her student years, Oliver wrote of her enthusiasm and interest in local theatre, music and arts groups as much as her involvement with visual arts activities, often combining several interests through her assistance in painting scenery for the Citizens' Theatre (Oliver, 2001).

Throughout the 1950s and into the early '60s, following Anne Donaldson's initial invitation, Oliver continued to publish her drawings in the *Glasgow Herald*, even after her work as a critic had begun.<sup>11</sup>

Oliver's relationship with the *Glasgow Herald* took a new turn in the early 1960s. According to Oliver, it was initially due to the reluctance of Alex Sturrock, the *Herald's* chief art critic, to review some exhibitions that he deemed 'too modern', that she was asked to work as an art critic 'to do the things he didn't want to do'. When Sturrock left the *Herald*, the Assistant Editor and chief leader writer Reginald Biles contacted Oliver to ask if she would like to become the art critic.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> In Oliver's scrapbooks, in her exhibition of the Festival drawings in Edinburgh's Outlook Tower in 1959, and much more recently in an exhibition at Glasgow School of Art in 2006, luminaries of theatre, literature, opera and ballet – John Betjeman, Maria Callas, Yehudi Menuhin - were all recorded in Oliver's deftly executed, expressive sketches and line drawings. As she would find with her writing, these drawings demanded a keen eye, concentration and the ability to respond to culture without the luxury of time for reflection or self-editing.

<sup>12</sup> In almost all her reminiscences and interviews Oliver was at pains to stress that her writing for the *Glasgow Herald* was published not under her name, but anonymously as 'Our Art Critic'. However, archival research reveals that while this was generally the case, there was an element of 'selective memory' in Oliver's insistence that her *Herald* writing was not credited. While the majority of reviews and features in Oliver's own scrapbooks and cuttings were indeed credited to 'Our Art Critic', in fact, several articles were published in the 1950s and early '60s authored by both 'Cordelia Patrick' and 'Cordelia Oliver'. Oliver's slight rewriting of history in this respect perhaps indicates her reluctance to draw attention to early 'filler' pieces for the pages devoted to 'Women's Topics' and 'Homes and Property', yet the germ of her art criticism can be identified in some of this early journalism, such as her 1960 reviews of the Royal Academy exhibition, 'A Personal Choice from the Royal Academy

The rise of Oliver's reputation as an art critic was meteoric. Shortly after beginning to write for the *Glasgow Herald*, she received a phone call from an editor at *The Times* inviting her to write art reviews as 'Our Special Correspondent'. Along with her writing for these two major broadsheets, Oliver was subsequently approached by *The Guardian's* Brian Redhead, who also asked her to write reviews of visual art and theatre based on the quality of the reviews he had read in *The Herald*. This time, though, Oliver's writing would be published under her own name, rather than as an anonymous critic or correspondent. While this visibility confirmed her growing reputation as a critic, and undoubtedly bolstered her confidence in her ability to write, it also brought difficulties as Oliver attempted to juggle her roles as both practising artist and critic, a position which became increasingly difficult to maintain. In reminiscences written towards the end of her career, Oliver frequently referred to the dilemma she perceived in relation to working concurrently as artist and critic. In 2006 she recalled 'I was to discover that one cannot comfortably function as a practicing painter and a serious critic at one and the same time (Oliver, 2006). In 2008, she reiterated the point, noting that '[...] having become a named critic [...] I had to cease showing my work in the RSA and other public exhibitions. After much consideration I realised one cannot do both' (Oliver, 2008). The artist and curator Kathy Chambers, however, has claimed that Oliver's decision to give up exhibiting publicly was directly linked to her experience of hearing another artist-critic's work lambasted:

I think it was in the late 1960s that she had gone to an exhibition which included work by The *Scotsman* critic Edward Gage. She attended with colleagues and friends and there was much discussion about the fact that Gage's work was not as good as many of the artists he reviewed. One friend said to Cordelia, "My goodness! Look at that painting! Look at that, and imagine what he had to say about me!" From that time on she said she felt that being a critic and an exhibiting artist was a conflict of interest. She felt she had to choose, and that if she continued as a painter she wouldn't be able to be quite so objective about other artists' work (Chambers, 2010).

In both cases, editors from *The Times* and *The Guardian* had invited Oliver to contribute her critical writing based not on personal connections or existing links, but strictly on the basis of her writing for

---

Exhibition' (Oliver, 1960a, p.12) and the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts, 'Pictures of Life and Variety' (Oliver, 1960b, p.6).

*The Glasgow Herald*. In terms of Oliver's confidence as an emerging voice in Scotland, the fact that she had been 'headhunted' twice in quick succession by such established and respected UK broadsheets undoubtedly encouraged her to pursue her career as a critic, and to her audience her position was further validated as a critic of note. Along with her visual arts criticism Oliver also began to build a reputation as a theatre critic, writing on the performing arts for publications such as *Plays and Players* and *Plays International* as well as for *The Guardian*.

To an extent, like her art criticism, Oliver's critical response to theatre came from the position of having herself been a performer albeit to a lesser degree than her experience and training as an artist. Nevertheless, her understanding of performance was based on personal knowledge of the difficulties and challenges faced by performers of all kinds. Whilst this knowledge could aid her understanding and empathy towards the works she reviewed (as opposed to the notion of the critic as a removed observer) it could, conversely, evoke a sense of righteous indignation bordering on a sense of personal affront when performers (or artists) were, in her view, unsuccessful. As I shall go on to discuss in more depth later, Oliver's knowledge of theatre, stagecraft and performance stood her in good stead later in her career. In the early 1970s, confronted with avant-garde work which spanned theatre and visual art (which for many of her peers was perplexing and confusingly interdisciplinary), Oliver would draw on her understanding of performance to make sense of these works.

## **The *Glasgow Herald***

Many of Oliver's reviews for the *Glasgow Herald*<sup>13</sup> in the 1960s focused on Scottish painting. From some of the earliest reviews, Oliver's enthusiasm for her subject is clearly expressed. Perhaps more than any other feature, the real hallmark of her writing is her passionate engagement with whatever she discusses or describes (though it has to be noted that exhibitions of sculpture were rarely reviewed with the same excitement as the writing on painting or performance). There are no examples of Oliver's writing in which the reader is left in doubt as to the opinion of the critic, nor a sense that the job of reviewing has been a workaday task. The necessity to see so many exhibitions often introduced Oliver to

---

<sup>13</sup> The newspaper now known as *The Herald* was originally titled the *Glasgow Herald* while Oliver was employed as a critic and artist. The title changed in 1992 to *The Herald* but I have used the title *Glasgow Herald* in all references.

the work of artists she would support for the rest of her career, and particular names were mentioned repeatedly in reviews of major group exhibitions.<sup>14</sup>

In a review from May 1960 (Oliver, 1960c, p.7) Oliver wrote effusively of the work of John Houston in a solo show at the Scottish Gallery. For Oliver, Houston's landscapes and still lifes were 'somehow recognisably Scottish' and the artist 'a colourist really worthy of the name'. Along with the works themselves, in oil and watercolour, Oliver comments on the gallery space, claiming that 'the newly decorated white gallery and the glowing Houston paintings combine together to make one of the most exhilarating one-man shows since the Edinburgh Festival Braque exhibition some years ago.' In tandem with her detailed yet succinct visual description of the paintings themselves, Oliver manages, within one small review, to incorporate a range of references in order to situate Houston's work within a wider framework. Along with Braque, with whom Houston is said to share the capability to evoke the same 'happy effect on the spirits', the Scottish painters Joan Eardley and Arthur Melville are mentioned, as are Turner, Macbeth, stained glass and tapestries (Oliver, 1960c, p.7).

In one of several reviews of her friend Tom Macdonald's work, published in the *Glasgow Herald* in May 1961, Oliver again concentrates on the painterliness of the works, 'full of healthy, vigorous brushwork and intelligent, evocative colour', as well as commenting on the gallery space in which the works are displayed:

Particularly good are the landscape themes in pastel, a medium Tom Macdonald uses with respect and no little sensitivity. In these, in quick parallel strokes and patches of low rich colours, he manages not only to suggest the initial subterranean upheavals but also, without necessarily making direct statements about it, to distil much of the essence, as it were of a particular landscape [...] Working in gouache, in a slightly looser style, but using similar colour, he enjoys interesting textures as on good modern pottery. The few paintings in oils I find less interesting, although I remember seeing similar works by this painter, with their heavy squares of impasto, hung in the open air where a strong side light seemed to give them more vitality (Oliver, 1961a).

---

<sup>14</sup> An exhibition of the work of Jack Knox, Anda Paterson, Carole Gibbons and Ian McCulloch, for example, was reviewed in the *Glasgow Herald* in August, 1960. Oliver would revisit the work of these Glasgow-based artists numerous times over the next two decades, both in print and in selections for exhibitions later in her career.

Oliver returned to Macdonald's work several times over the course of his career, from newspaper reviews to catalogue essays and features.<sup>15</sup> In 1986 Oliver wrote an extended catalogue essay for a memorial exhibition held at the Third Eye Centre. In the essay Oliver emphasised Macdonald's work as a painter and designer for theatre (Oliver had assisted Macdonald with set design and scenery painting while a student at Glasgow School of Art) and although no explicit mention is made of her own experience in theatre, she undoubtedly felt an affinity with Macdonald as an artist whose approach was informed by formative years as a member of groups such as the Glasgow Workers Theatre Group, the Unity Theatre and the Glasgow Jewish Institute Players. But apart from her clear enthusiasm for Macdonald's involvement in theatre and her admiration for his work, there are passages in the essay which reveal something of Oliver's own critical principles:

Questioned about the difficulties many people feel in coming to terms with the work of modern artists, its seeming opacity, its mystique, he was surprisingly rigorous in his reply. As in law, he said, ignorance is no excuse. Art is essentially symbolic, metamorphic: painting is a language, and people who wish to enjoy good paintings must learn the basics of that language. 'After all', he said, 'if I want to read a book, I have to be able to actually read. So the idea of a populist art for the masses is a nonsense, like books for people who cannot read. Even then, the fact that someone can read is only a beginning, but the ability must be there if the book is to mean anything. It is the same with painting.' (Oliver, 1986, p.5)

Even when her focus changed in terms of the types of work she addressed, the style and timbre of Oliver's criticism was remarkably consistent throughout her long career. To a reader familiar with her writing, Oliver's recounting of Macdonald's comments on painting clearly reflects her own position towards the interpretation of contemporary art on the part of the viewer. This manifested itself in her writing through an occasional use of specialist language, language which would be familiar only to an informed audience. In her broadsheet criticism, designed for a general readership, Oliver's frequent use of high cultural references as parallels and analogies in her description of art work and her regular, if economical, use of terminology specific to art (usually related to process or technique) demonstrates a stance akin to Macdonald's, that for both artists 'ignorance is no excuse' and that 'people who wish to

---

<sup>15</sup> The 1986 memorial exhibition was also the feature of an article by Oliver for *Scottish Theatre News* ('Tom MacDonald, painter and stage designer 1914-1985', *Scottish Theatre News*, May/June 1986, pp.8-10).



enjoy good paintings must learn the basics of that language'. In this respect, however, there is evidence that Oliver saw her role as a critic as that of one who could help to familiarise her readership with 'the basics of that language', through clear prose and a way of using potentially obscure terms in a context that would convey something of their meaning (in descriptive passages, for example).

Like Alexander Moffat's writing, discussed, Oliver's prose rarely slipped into over-stylisation. The strength of both writers' work was its lucidity and straightforwardness which simultaneously avoided over-simplification or 'dumbing down'. Oliver's insistence on using language appropriate and specific to her subject (i.e. use of art terminology and art historical reference) makes her writing exemplary in relation to many contemporary debates and issues surrounding art writing and criticism such as the accessibility of art criticism, its potential to 'alienate' readers through jargon, and what has been regarded as an increasing tendency towards obscurantism in art writing. Essentially, then, Oliver's position seemed to be that while her readership had a responsibility to learn at least the basics of the history, context and language of art, she could play a role in imparting some of this knowledge to them. It could be argued, then, that there is an element of elitism and intellectual snobbery in Oliver's expectations of her readers, but if this is the case it is resolutely a snobbery of the kind that Oscar Wilde would have deemed an 'aristocracy of taste' rather than one of class. In other words, while Oliver wanted her writing to be accessible, and took pains to ensure it was clear and engaging, she also demanded a certain degree of knowledge and understanding on the part of her readership in the first instance.

Oliver's early criticism for the *Glasgow Herald* reviewed exhibitions (mainly of painting) held at a small number of established, relatively conservative galleries and institutions such as Aitken Dott, the Scottish Gallery, the Royal Scottish Academy, the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts at McLellan Galleries, Glasgow Art Gallery at Kelvingrove and the recently opened Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh. This undoubtedly says more about the paucity of exhibition spaces in Scotland than about Oliver's commitment to younger, grassroots activity. Rather, some of the more established exhibition spaces were subject to intense criticism from Oliver in relation not only to the selection of works – she called for a *Salon des Refuses* in a review of the RSA exhibition April 1964 – but to their presentation – how and where the works were hung, whether or not the wall colour was suitable for the paintings, the effects of gallery lighting and so on. Increasingly, as younger groups of artists and smaller galleries and exhibition spaces began to emerge, Oliver conscientiously reported on their activity with the same

seriousness demanded by the larger, more powerful spaces (the Glasgow Group and the 57 Gallery, for example, were the subject of several reviews in the early 1960s). As well as her writing on contemporary art, Oliver was also asked to review art historical exhibitions and, occasionally, to write on architecture and design.

Throughout her writing on visual art, Oliver consistently underpinned her reviews and essays with detailed visual description. Whilst this may seem to be an obvious prerequisite to writing about visual art – the assumed mainstay of art criticism – it is remarkable that much art writing – both then and now – says little about what the work actually looks like. Much writing on art, from artist’s statements to broadsheet journalism, often jumps straight to a discussion of theme, idea or subject matter, ‘leapfrogging’ visual description as though it is too obvious a factor to comment upon. As Charles Dickens’ review of John Everett Millais’ *Christ in the House of his Parents* made manifest, however, visual description can itself act as the vehicle for evaluation or judgement (Dickens, 1850, pp. 12-14). Oliver’s criticism, therefore, is not strictly formalist in her attention to form, technique, colour, composition, etc. Rather, she often identified external references and ideas *through* form and saw her position as an artist-critic as underpinning her emphasis on the visual elements.<sup>16</sup> An excerpt from her mixed review of the work of the Glasgow Group in the early 1960s highlights some of these tendencies:

William Birnie’s landscapes are, for me, too fussy and too big, at times, for their content, in spite of occasional minor pleasures in his low, shimmering colour: Margery Clinton, too, although her surface attack is bold enough, seems unable to penetrate deeper than the thin skin of her paint; and neither McAslan (except in one airy little gouache that has hints of a Peploe) nor James Watt, most of whose pleasantly competent ships and landscapes have been seen and enjoyed before, is saying enough to hold the interest for long.

James Spence’s large, bottom-heavy nudes, with their rather self-conscious simplicity, are much less significant, too, than the painter, one feels, intends. (Does his ‘Kneeling Figure’ attempt a Henry Moore-ish woman-landscape in paint?)

---

<sup>16</sup> In relation to this, Oliver was often disdainful of what she perceived as an art historical approach to art writing. In an interview in 2002 she noted: ‘Art historians give me the pip. All they are bothered about is who the artist was, the biographical details and dates, instead of looking at the work itself’ (Oliver, 2002).

Although I find unattractive the overworked art nouveau texturism of Anda Paterson's present work (the green 'Vision of Ezekiel' brings, quite unsuitably, memories of Arthur Rackham) there is always evidence of a singular personality behind the highly competent brush.

[...] Jack Knox and Ian McCulloch, too, are painters on the move. [...] Knox exploits to the utmost his narrow palette of orange-yellow, white and black, with umber and dull green rumbling in the background, and McCulloch's canvases (making one think of Norman McLaren's brilliant 3D abstract films) are full of bright whorls and circles that pluck themselves from black or deep blue like pinwheels and sparks stamped on the retina when the eyes are closed (Oliver, c.1960d).

In many respects, then, as I have noted, Oliver responded to works as a critic as she had as an artist and commercial illustrator – the visual and formal elements (as opposed to the broader theme or concept) frequently came first and foremost. Much of Oliver's writing – particularly the descriptive passages – can be seen as a selective, critical 'sketch' of her impressions, expressed in words rather than drawing. Often, Oliver's critical judgement would rest on how successfully she deemed an artist to have 'matched' their critical intentions with the visual manifestation and formal expression of these ambitions in their chosen medium, as the above review demonstrates.

### ***The Times***

The focus of Oliver's writing for the *Glasgow Herald* was primarily coverage of visual art exhibitions and events. As I have mentioned, however, her initial relationship with the paper was as a commercial artist and illustrator and her earliest writings for the *Herald* had begun as essentially 'stock' filler pieces of journalism published alongside her drawings. Clearly, once she began writing art criticism 'proper' in the early 1960s, Oliver's ability and knowledge were quickly recognised by her editors and her readership. Whereas, though, Oliver focused on visual art for *The Guardian*, she was also a significant and respected theatre critic, acting as Scottish correspondent for reviews of theatre, opera and related performing arts. For *The Times*, however, Oliver's writing was almost entirely devoted to visual art.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Though Oliver claimed (Oliver, 2002 and Oliver, 2004) that she wrote only 'one or two things' for *The Times*, her own archive contained numerous cuttings of reviews stretching from 1961 to 1969.

As the only London-based newspaper for which Oliver was writing in the early years of her career (*The Guardian* being based in Manchester until its move to London in 1964), *The Times* often commissioned reviews of larger, 'blockbuster' exhibitions, particularly those held as part of the Edinburgh Festival. A snapshot of Oliver's reviews for *The Times* in the 1960s gives a flavour of what the paper deemed interesting and worthy of critical attention. Many of *The Times* reviews were of major summer exhibitions held at prestigious national galleries. These were often art historical retrospectives or profiles of established artists such as the piece on Joan Eardley in 1964 shortly after the painter's death and an obituary of Robert Macbryde in 1966. Other *Times* reviews of the period included a review of the 'Yugoslav Modern Primitives' exhibition and the jubilee of Dovecote Tapestries in August 1962 and reviews of Festival exhibitions by Paul Klee in July 1962, Delacroix in 1964 and Julius Bissier and Giorgio Morandi in August 1965. Clearly, *The Times* reviews reflected the taste of a metropolitan newspaper and its readership in terms of what Oliver was commissioned to report on and review. For some of this writing Oliver was essentially acting as an understudy for London-based *Times* critics with too much to cover at Festival time – almost all of the review cuttings in her own archive were published during July and August (Chambers, 2010). The quality of her writing for *The Times* is in no way poorer or less rigorous than that for other publications, but it perhaps lacks the enthusiasm Oliver demonstrated in her writing elsewhere. There were, however, a few exceptions to this, notably in her rare coverage of Glasgow-based exhibitions for *The Times*, such as the review discussed below.

*The Times* review of the 1968 exhibition 'New Painting in Glasgow 1940 - 46' is a prime example of the kind of writing which confirmed Oliver's reputation as a critic to be reckoned with (Oliver, 1968). No critical punches were pulled in her scathing attack on the curatorial premise of the exhibition ('a valiant attempt to give, as it were, bone and flesh to something which never really happened'). Oliver's indignation boils over in her attempt to redress the inaccuracies she identifies on the part of Dennis Parr, the exhibition's organizer, in this particular 'framing' of the art scene in Glasgow at the time of Oliver's own studies at Glasgow School of Art, beginning a lengthy dressing-down with the words 'The facts are these [...]'. In some respects, Oliver contradicts her own memories of the period by taking Parr to task on details she herself perpetuated on numerous occasions (such as the Polish refugee Jankel Adler's influence on art practice in Glasgow in the 1940s). The fact that the exhibition took place at the Scottish Arts Council gallery in Glasgow indicates, perhaps, that Oliver's real outrage was that Parr had been commissioned to curate an exhibition she would like to have organised, or at least have been

involved in selecting. For all Oliver's critical integrity in the main, there are rare instances of critical 'sour grapes' at play, and the review of 'New Painting in Glasgow 1940 - 46' is undoubtedly one of them.

## ***The Guardian***

At various points in the 1960s Oliver wrote simultaneously for *The Guardian*<sup>18</sup>, *The Times* and the *Glasgow Herald*. Occasionally, the same exhibitions were reviewed for several newspapers concurrently, which necessitated a careful revision of the text for each to avoid repetition.<sup>19</sup> Oliver's reputation as a critic, however, was really cemented through her writing for *The Guardian*. This was due both to the longevity of her relationship with the paper and the inclusion of a byline attributing the writing to Oliver.<sup>20</sup> Between 1961 and 1993 Oliver published over four hundred art and theatre reviews for *The Guardian* alone and of these many centred on reviews of contemporary art exhibitions in Scotland.

Oliver's first *Guardian* review, published in April 1961, was a short, unremarkable piece on an exhibition by students of the Department of Interior Design at Glasgow School of Art, accompanied by a small line drawing of one of the designs (Oliver, 1961b, p.8).<sup>21</sup> Some of Oliver's early writings for the *Glasgow Herald* had concentrated on design and architecture, often in the form of tips, reports and observations in the Homes and Properties section, alongside her drawings. *The Guardian* piece, however, was very much an exhibition review, however modest. Following this rather tentative start, Oliver's writing quickly gathered pace in terms of column inches and confidence. The sense of a burgeoning critical confidence in Oliver's writings of the early 1960s may well have been aided by Brian Redhead's progressive approach to commissioning.<sup>22</sup> Decisions regarding what should be reviewed were often

---

<sup>18</sup> Although Oliver consistently referred to her work for 'the *Manchester Guardian*' (see, for instance, Oliver, 2002 and Oliver, 2004) the newspaper, whilst based in Manchester until 1964 before relocating to London, had dropped the 'Manchester' from the title in 1959, before Oliver began writing for the paper.

<sup>19</sup> The 1961 'Modern Argentine Painting and Sculpture' exhibition, for example, was reviewed for the *Glasgow Herald* and *The Guardian* while the 1962 Paul Klee exhibition, held at the Edinburgh Festival, was reviewed for *The Times* and *The Guardian*.

<sup>20</sup> As I have noted, while Oliver's name had, very occasionally, been published by the *Glasgow Herald* (especially in early reviews and pieces in the late 1950s and early '60s), *The Guardian* was the first publication to consistently credit each review and article explicitly to Oliver, in contrast to the rather more generic monikers – Our Art Critic; Our Special Correspondent – generally favoured by the *Glasgow Herald* and *The Times*.

<sup>21</sup> I cite this as Oliver's first *Guardian* review as she referred at interview to a review of a student interior design exhibition as her first published art criticism for the paper (Oliver, 2002). In addition, *The Guardian*'s digital archive lists this as the first review by Oliver. However, in Oliver's own press cuttings there are two small reviews with her *Guardian* collection dated 1960 ('Aberdeen Artists in Isolation', dated 3 August 1960, on the ABBO group and 'Out of the West', dated 10 or 16 October 1960, a review of the annual RGI exhibition).

<sup>22</sup> After joining *The Guardian* in 1954 Redhead became Features Editor within five years. His commissioning of Oliver is significant in the context of his period of editorship. As well as his support of Oliver, Redhead championed *The Guardian*'s first

delegated to Oliver: 'In those days [...] *The Guardian* features staff [...] were still willing to take on trust an occasional suggestion from me that this or that story was worth a half-page with pictures' (Oliver, 1998, p.8).

Like her writing for the *Glasgow Herald* and *The Times* in the same period, many of the early reviews for *The Guardian* (1961–1965) focused on Scottish painting, and particular names appear repeatedly in Oliver's coverage of group exhibitions, as they had in writings elsewhere (Jack Knox, Ian McCulloch and Carole Gibbons, for example, were frequently mentioned). The focus on particular names in these reviews perhaps represents an early attempt on Oliver's part to profile and highlight younger artists, often from Glasgow, who were frequently overshadowed in the press by Edinburgh heavyweights such as Gillies, Philipson, Mactaggart, Maxwell and Redpath. In a review titled 'Contemporary Exhibition at Inverleith', for example, Oliver wrote:

For once there is no emphasis either on 'establishment' or 'outside' painters. [...] It is undoubtedly satisfying to see a good Carole Gibbons collage holding its own with an Elizabeth Blackadder landscape; [...] Tom Macdonald's sun-slanting 'Figure in Interior' against Philipson's gleaming 'Crowing Cock'; or Ian McCulloch's 'Nocturne' face to face with William Johnstone's equally sombre 'Northern Gothic'(Oliver, 1964).

Likewise, in further reviews from the early 1960s, Oliver again perpetuates an opposition between the East and West Coast painters, in which she decries the 'noticeable lack of work from Glasgow' in Scottish exhibitions and sets out to 'correct the prevalent impression that Scottish painting begins and ends in Edinburgh' (Oliver, 1964b).<sup>23</sup>

That Oliver reviewed so many exhibitions of Scottish painting indicates first of all the dominance of painting in terms of gallery space and exhibitions in Scotland and secondly the perceived desire on the part of *The Guardian* that their Scottish correspondent should act as an ambassador and reporter 'on the ground' to disseminate to its UK-wide readers what was happening north of the border. It is

---

architecture critic, Diana Rowntree. As Redhead's obituary noted his role 'took on increasing importance in the early Sixties, as the quality papers started to respond to demands for better coverage of social and lifestyle issues, in part trying to draw women readers into what had hitherto been essentially a club for men' (Leapman, 1994). It seems likely that Redhead's support of women critics was part of this attempt to expand the publication's readership and reflect social change. Oliver's first review, in 1961, was included under the 'Mainly for Women' page.

<sup>23</sup> See also *The Guardian* reviews 'Paintings at Edinburgh' (29 January 1963), 'Scottish Painting' (9 October 1963) and 'Plus/Minus Thirty' (4 June 1964).

admirable, in this respect, then, that Oliver risked her critical reputation in support of so many young, emerging artists whose careers she followed rather than simply perpetuating the view of Scottish art as represented and characterised by the 'old masters' of the RSA or sticking firmly to coverage of the 'blockbuster' exhibitions hosted by established institutions. This again reflects Oliver's belief in the function of criticism as that of advocacy, of fostering and encouraging talent in artists – though she strongly opposed the notion of the critic as a figure who takes credit for 'discovering' artists – and of introducing audiences to this new work.<sup>24</sup> As she noted in a short review in *The Guardian* in 1961:

The spectacle of a young painter, just out of art school, making his first tentative (or sometimes, indeed, defiant and rather rash) experiments with his chosen medium, is always peculiarly satisfying. And of course, the most satisfying of all is to recognise the moment when he finds his feet and suddenly moves ahead in a style or form of expression which becomes part of himself (Oliver, 1961c).

In June 1961 Oliver reviewed the work of the Young Glasgow Group (later renamed the Glasgow Group), an exhibiting group of Glasgow School of Art graduates she would return to again and again in her art criticism in the 1960s and '70s. Describing them in the review as 'very promising' and 'the best work' as 'very good indeed', Oliver goes on to discuss the merits of paintings by Douglas Abercrombie, Carole Gibbons and Anda Paterson in whose work she identified a sense of development. What is pertinent in this review, however, is the sense of Oliver's own burgeoning development as an art critic. At this early stage, along with her even-handed praise for the group, Oliver demonstrated a willingness to offer a frank appraisal of the more 'disappointing' work on display. Jack Knox, whose work Oliver admired and supported throughout his career, was described, along with James Morrison, as a painter 'of proved ability' whose 'Cloud' paintings fell short of the standard expected by the critic. The paintings, according to Oliver, seemed 'for him, thin and meaningless'. Morrison's work was criticised for its lack of progress: 'he seems hardly to have moved at all since last year'. In contrast, Anda Paterson, whilst losing some of the 'old attractive sparseness', had shown 'an interesting development in her small group of paintings. [...] The almost oriental restraint-and-tension, which gave to her earlier landscapes much of their

---

<sup>24</sup> Oliver has been caustic in her assessment of certain 'professional' critics who have no background or training in visual arts practice. Clare Henry, one of the most prominent art journalists in Scotland in the 1980s, for example, has been singled out by Oliver as representative of critics who attempt to 'bathe in the reflected glory' of artists they claim to have 'discovered' (Oliver, 2002).

quality, has now been taken over into abstraction along with a new interest in texture, colour being rubbed into a white impasto, giving, almost, a feeling of rather rich embroidery.' The other telling reference in the review concerns Oliver's comment on those within the group 'who remain quietly – and courageously – reactionary, this being no mean feat one suspects, in such a forward-looking company' (Oliver, 1961d, p.9). The statement could easily be seen to reflect Oliver's own courageous integrity in being unconcerned with the vagaries of fashion in her art and criticism.

In spite of her lack of concern for 'fashionable' work, however, many other *Guardian* reviews from the early '60s nevertheless demonstrate Oliver's attempts to identify current trends or new directions in the art she saw, even amongst the more established, conservative quarters of the art world. In a review from 1962, for instance, Oliver discussed the 'new enthusiasm for watercolour' that had been 'making itself felt in recent annual exhibitions of the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolours, once a thoroughly predictable, even dull affair. Now a new feeling for the medium is evident, colour and courage going hand in hand with enjoyment of its wetness and transparency' (Oliver, 1962). The review teeters between admiration and exasperation, again conveying Oliver's ability to produce carefully balanced criticism which seeks to 'weigh up' the successes and failures of single works of art, as well as whole exhibitions. In a critical equivalent to a back-handed compliment Oliver lures the reader into the belief that she wholeheartedly admires the painters 'mainly responsible for this minor revolution', praising their long-standing skill and ability to tap 'a rich lyrical vein of visual poetry, making transparent colour sing and glow in landscapes, fantasies and wonderfully decorative still-lives'. In the next line, however, the blow is dealt: 'Of course, the inevitable happened: one can still see many a Gillies or a Maxwell at one, two or ten removes from the original that inspired it.' The younger painters, described as 'finding their feet' are criticised for being in danger of 'retreating into beautiful, private worlds that have less to do with reality, than, say, Les Sylphides.' Following this, another about-turn in a sentence which both offers and retracts admiration on the part of the critic: 'No-one could deny beauty, however, in the dark, glowing cats-cradle complications of John Houston, who loses his hold only when he pushes colour to extremes of intensity' (Oliver, 1962).

A similar review, published in 1964, opens again by bemoaning the tendency towards the 'decorative' in Scottish painting (Oliver, 1964c). In both reviews, Oliver almost prefigures Alexander Moffat's later calls – in both art and writing – for a return to Realism in Scottish painting (in opposition to the bourgeois



propriety and mediocrity both artists often identified in the work of the 'Edinburgh School', characterised by the work of the established Royal Academicians).

More than once the wish has been expressed on the subject of present-day Scottish painting that someone would deliberately paint an ugly picture as an antidote to so much sensibility and elegant painterliness.

In typical Oliver style, this provocative opening statement quickly gives way to an ironic tone:

Since Fred Pollock [...] seems to have done his best to oblige, it is with a certain sense of ingratitude that one admits to disappointment. Not that the three or four large oils in question are extraordinary in their ugliness: if they were, one would probably enjoy them – or at least enjoy disliking them. In only one, 'Woman', is there a sense of the painter's pleasure or satisfaction in applying the thick, pallid, buttery yellow paint. Their strong superficial resemblance to de Kooning, though with little of the latter's structural strength, is really irrelevant. What worries me is the underlying feeling that Pollock is at heart a brilliant and sensitive stylist who is deliberately embracing a sort of clumsy anarchy (Oliver, 1964c).

Along with acting as a key example of Oliver's writing, the review demonstrates both her critical acuity and the ongoing dilemma she felt between, on the one hand, an emotive response to 'painterliness' and, on the other, an understanding of the need for a deeper intellectual and critical enquiry on the part of contemporary Scottish artists. Several reviews, especially those covering Royal Academy exhibitions in 1963 and 1964, discuss the perceived dichotomy between beauty and 'serious' content.<sup>25</sup> In another *Guardian* review Oliver described this as a particularly Scottish trait (again, this was discussed repeatedly in Oliver's reviews of the period):

---

<sup>25</sup> The debate is peculiarly resonant today, as argument continues to rage in the wake of the so-called 'return' to formalism. See, for example, the divisions in US art criticism in response to Dave Hickey's call for a 'return to beauty' in contemporary art. See also the response to J.J. Charlesworth's heralding of neo-formalism in the pages of *Art Monthly* in 2003, and the heated response from Scottish artist Nick Evans in *Variant*, who identified such 'formalist' works as being representative of a strategic retreat from political engagement in contemporary art. The apparent binary opposition between form and content continues in debates about neo-conceptualism and 'ideas art' 'versus' the use of pattern, 'beauty' and ornament in contemporary art. Clearly, these two modes need not be mutually exclusive, but largely continue to be theorised as polarised and oppositional positions, as Evans highlighted.

Many Scots painters, in a far greater degree than their English counterparts, have what sometimes seems to amount to an obsessive interest in the beauties of surface colour and texture. Almost, you would think, their aim is to seduce and intoxicate the eye and to lull the mind into a pleasant stupor. But now – and I, for one am happy to see it – there would seem to be a greater desire to strike something more than an emotional response (Oliver, 1963).

While some of Oliver's contemporaries (Moffat and Crozier are prime examples) perhaps opposed the Royal Scottish Academy on principle, as representative of 'the establishment' (and synonymous for many young artists with conservatism and 'the old guard'), Oliver, while always at pains to assess and observe developments (or lack thereof) in the Academy, did not oppose it purely because of its power and authority. In some instances she was respectful, even deferential, towards the senior painters of the Academy, seeking to acknowledge the strengths in their work (the 'Scottishness' of their use of colour; their virtuoso handling of paint; their technical prowess) as often as condemning their weaknesses (anti-intellectualism; insularity; regression).<sup>26</sup>

## Critical Approach

Certain features become apparent in reading Oliver's criticism and these distinctive writerly traits were common to all her writing, almost regardless of decade or type of publication. The Pollock review encapsulates many of the characteristics of Oliver's writing. For Oliver, a review was not merely a summary or report of what had been seen (often the mainstay of journalistic reviews of visual art in the period). Rather, Oliver's reviews were almost always an evaluative practice, based on visual scrutiny. Attention to the visual, formal aspects of works often underpinned Oliver's writing, but her reviews rarely remained as mere exercises in observation, however sophisticated this transformation of the visual into words. In short, an evaluative approach to criticism can be seen in many examples of Oliver's writing, with judgements expressed both directly and indirectly, and 'value' both implied and stated. In terms of style, though Oliver maintained a 'straightforward' prose style throughout her career, never

---

<sup>26</sup> Oliver's discussions of Robin Philipson's work are an interesting example here. Oliver privately admitted to disliking Philipson's work (see Oliver, 2002 and Chambers, 2010) but often praised his painting in her criticism. This seems to indicate not that Oliver's writing lacked integrity but, in contrast, that she attempted to maintain some level of critical objectivity in her response to the works she discussed. As such, her reviews of Philipson could be seen as an attempt – in the traditional understanding of the function of criticism - to avoid 'personal taste' affecting critical judgement.

veering into self-consciously stylised or creative criticism, many of her reviews (such as those quoted above) demonstrate her ability to craft richly layered, allusive prose through visual description. Even in seemingly simple exhibition reviews, Oliver's deeply evocative descriptive passages on painting often parallel the form of their subject. Texture, brushwork, tone and colour sometimes seem to be mirrored in the redolent, poetic tone of Oliver's idiom. In this way, Oliver reveals not only her interest in language and writing but, simultaneously, her understanding of how to persuade, convince and influence readers of her judgement through writerly techniques.

As some of the previous quotes have shown, the use of language and structure in Oliver's reviews is employed in a number of ways and in some respects a kind of formula or template approach to reviewing can be identified across her critical writing. Firstly, Oliver attempts to engage the reader, often through use of an enthusiastic tone or strong, sometimes provocative, opening statement. These opening paragraphs would regularly state an explicit position, stance or opinion on the part of the critic and were frequently issue-based, such as a comment on the state of art in Scotland, art world infrastructure, broad statements on new directions or trends, confessional notes on the task of criticism and, occasionally, a clear sense that the author has a particular point to make or (perhaps more accurately) an axe to grind. Often these fiercely expressed views related to funding issues, particularly where galleries or events had been, in Oliver's opinion, unfairly ignored by funding bodies such as the Scottish Arts Council. Undoubtedly, some of the bugbears expressed in Oliver's art criticism were repeated ad infinitum to the end of her life (the closure of the Third Eye Centre is a case in point). Similarly, Oliver would make trenchant statements regarding artists or curators she felt had been unfairly marginalised, ignored or who had not received the recognition they (in her view) deserved (Richard Demarco would often be introduced in these terms). In some cases, Oliver adopted the mantle of the 'revisionist historian' and there is a sense of righteous indignation in cases where Oliver represents 'the facts' and 'corrects' the errors of curators, critics and art historians. This is especially true when these 'mistakes' relate to art in Glasgow, and in these examples it is interesting to observe Oliver's undisguised, vested interest in representing the history of painting in Glasgow.

In reviews of group exhibitions Oliver almost always provided the reader with some kind of historical context or introduction to the exhibited works in order to 'situate' and highlight the relevance or significance of the works on show. Frequently, and for the same purpose, parallels would be drawn between the works reviewed and art historical precursors, works which, in Oliver's view, shared some

characteristic or approach with the contemporary works on display. Through this historical, contextual ‘framing’ Oliver demonstrated a rich and detailed knowledge of art history (her knowledge of European Modernism was particularly strong) which was rare in arts journalism of the period, especially in terms of her attempts to locate Scottish art within a broader, international context.

Along with art historical references Oliver frequently presented analogies, parallels and references to other disciplines within the arts rather than remaining strictly within the confines of fine art.<sup>27</sup> In 1960, Oliver suggests that Tom Macdonald’s work recalls ‘the “night thickens” speech from Macbeth’ (Oliver, 1960) whilst in a 1964 *Herald* review Oliver attempts to convey the experience of looking at the works she described by writing that she ‘always imagined the music of Brahms would look like this’ (Oliver, 1964). A review of Alan Davie, William Gear and Robert Methven, reviewed in the early 1960s, similarly makes use of musical analogies throughout: ‘Davie’s jumping, wriggling, syncopated little canvases nudge one impatiently from every side’, whilst Methven’s ‘cool, dark canvases’ are ‘obvious in brittle, tenuous shapes and sharp, staccato tinkles (one thinks of the sounds made by Les Structures Sonores’ (Oliver, 1961).

I have emphasised Oliver’s interest in cross- and inter-disciplinary approaches to visual art criticism, and have suggested that in the case of several figures I discuss in this research this tendency might be seen as a significant Scottish trait, linked to traditions of the Scots polymath, the makar and the democratic intellect. Along with George Elder Davies’s study of the unified approach to knowledge in the history of Scottish education (as opposed to the specialist tradition of English universities such as Oxford and Cambridge) (Davies, 1961), a broad, generalist tradition of intellectual enquiry, whilst not specific to Scotland, nevertheless underpinned the critical approaches and diverse practices of many notable Scots artists, writers and thinkers including Patrick Geddes, J.D. Fergusson, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Tom McGrath, John Byrne, Alasdair Gray and Hugh MacDiarmid. Geddes in particular has been credited with pioneering interdisciplinary and interdependent approaches to the arts, humanities and sciences in his philosophy of education (Macdonald, 2009).

---

<sup>27</sup> Oliver adopted this approach in her theatre criticism as well as her visual art criticism. Her description of both visual art, theatre and music was almost synaesthetic – she used musical analogies to describe painting and references to painting to convey a sense of theatre. Examples include her 1965 review of the Julius Bissier exhibition: ‘Good singers know well how expressive and telling mezzo voce can be: how the seeming gentleness and restraint, far from concealing underlying power and vibrance, seem rather to intensify them. The tempera paintings of Julius Bissier [...] have much the same effect.’ (Oliver, *The Guardian*, August 3 1965)

An interest in 'crossing boundaries' was far from an unselfconscious stance on Oliver's part. In the 1980s she wrote of the 'present stress laid on the connection between art and design' in an article about the rich tradition of writers, musicians and performers who had studied at Glasgow School of Art. In the essay she also highlighted that, for all the emphasis on cross-fertilisation, for her own generation this had been far from encouraged, perhaps reflecting on her attempts to move between Fine Art departments:

[...] however true that may be for the generation that grew up in the sixties and after, it was certainly otherwise for the immediate post-war decade when, even within the art school, the boundaries were for the most part firmly fixed (Oliver, in Carrell, 1985, p.13).

Along with Oliver's diverse range of references and parallels, in her reviews of both group and solo exhibitions, as I have mentioned, there is almost always an expression of evaluation, judgement or some kind of discerning comment about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the work discussed. These statements related sometimes purely to the works on display – some works were singled out for praise while others were discussed in negative terms. Together with her discussion of specific works, Oliver also regularly referred to other works within the artists' oeuvre, or compared new work with previous works by the artist. Whilst these statements revealed Oliver's preferences and opinions and communicated her critical judgement on the works for the benefit of her readership (what to look out for, how to 'read' the works, which exhibitions are worth visiting, etc.), there is also an indication that Oliver has reverted to teaching mode in some of this writing. Indeed, the tone of some of this unsolicited advice often seemed to be addressed directly to the artists, especially when the artists in question were younger or less established. In this sense, however progressive Oliver's vision, however stylised some elements of her writing, her critical principles are firmly rooted in the model of 'traditional' art criticism in Britain, characterised by the writings of John Ruskin. By this, I refer to the conventional understanding of the function of art criticism as interpretative and elucidatory and the function of critic, if not that of the moral crusader for the arts (i.e. Ruskin) then, at least, the notion of the critic as arbiter of taste, disseminating knowledge of what is significant and worthy of critical (and therefore broader public) attention. A similar critical paternalism can clearly be seen also in High Modernist criticism, typified by the writings of Clement Greenberg and contemporary with Oliver. While, undoubtedly, Oliver's criticism bears little relation to Greenbergian theory (Greenberg's insistence on medium-specific purity, for example, stands in direct opposition to Oliver's stance on the meeting and

merging of disciplines), the tone of her writing nevertheless brooks little dissent. Oliver's writing aims to inform, persuade and direct and in this respect it can be seen as veering towards dogma and paternalism, especially (and again parallels with Ruskin and Greenberg are apposite here) in the way Oliver promoted certain groups of artists, making clear allegiances in her criticism. In relation to Ruskin, Oliver's critical approach also shared with her Victorian predecessor the tendency to refer beyond works of art to include diverse topics. Where Ruskin (in volume two of *Modern Painters*, for example) brought in parallels and references to music, geology and poetry in order to fully explore his themes, Oliver likewise drew on a range of examples in her description, analysis and comparisons of works of visual art. The same could be said of David Sylvester, Oliver's London-based contemporary, who worked on the *Observer* at the same time as Oliver was writing for the *Guardian*.

Whilst I have referred to Greenberg as the most famous and dominant English-speaking art critic to be contemporaneous with Oliver, and have suggested certain common ground in critical principles, particularly Oliver's emphasis on the technique and formal qualities of painting, David Sylvester's criticism is perhaps closer to Oliver's in many ways. Like Oliver, Sylvester also worked simultaneously as a curator and critic (where Oliver reviewed both visual art and theatre, Sylvester reviewed film for the *Observer*), and shared with her a background as a practicing artist (and the decision to pursue writing over painting) and a position on the art panel of Arts Council. Like Oliver's prose, Sylvester's writing was marked by its passion and enthusiasm but also by its simplicity of style and by his sometimes unexpected analogies, drawn from topics which ranged far beyond standard art historical references. Like Oliver, Sylvester was also open to the latest developments in contemporary art, in contrast to the conventional outlook of many of their colleagues who favoured traditional wall- or plinth-based works of art.

Oliver's reputation as a 'fierce' critic is perhaps overstated and it could be the case that the mode of criticism she adopted was simply too 'critical' for the tastes of some, especially in relation to the generic, promotional, journalistic coverage of Scottish art seen elsewhere in the period. It would also be less than tenuous or speculative to assume that some of the opposition with which Oliver's writing was met was related to her gender. Certainly, for some 'old guard' artists, even in the latter part of the twentieth century, the fact that not only was a woman commenting on their work, but an opinionated,

knowledgeable and articulate woman at that, must have proved galling.<sup>28</sup> In spite of this, though, Oliver's confident tone may have been interpreted as arrogance at times, and her delivery could be less than tactful. These more rambunctious reviews are particularly identifiable in *The Guardian* from the mid-1960s onwards. In earlier reviews for *The Guardian*, the *Glasgow Herald* and *The Times*, Oliver's opinions are far less vociferously expressed. There is therefore a sense of Oliver's growing confidence, both in her writing and critical awareness as she became more prolific and as the years progressed. Along with this, as I will discuss later in this chapter, the more antagonistic reviews began to appear simultaneously with Oliver's retirement from exhibiting publicly as an artist, as though she had allowed herself full licence to comment, without fear of reciprocal judgement on her own artistic endeavours.

Words are carefully chosen in all Oliver's reviews, though in some instances insults are thinly veiled, to allow some sort of protection in the use of pejorative terms such as 'decorative' and 'inoffensive'. In a *Guardian* review of 1965, however, two painters were given critical short shrift in painfully unambiguous terms, with the characteristic opening provocation:

Not for the first time I notice that people who are persuaded only with difficulty to buy good modern paintings will all too often rush to purchase an obviously synthetic article. Strong words, perhaps, to introduce two apparently inoffensive one-man shows [...] Valerie Fraser and Jean Leslie are both very competent, even at times charming technicians who would surely, in a slightly earlier period, have followed a modified academic tradition with considerable success. But ours is a time that demands either an immediately recognisable, highly personal style, or genuine poetic vision, and what are painters to do who have neither? The danger – and neither of these painters avoids it – is that of seeing everything through the distorting mirror of another painter's work. Thus Miss Fraser has a mind's eye filled with the Paris of Utrillo and rich, languorous landscape world of MacTaggart (among several other influences), while Miss Leslie's Maxwellian fantasies and Eardley-inspired cornfields by the sea stop short at the point where these painters really begin, *as artists*, to function (Oliver, 1965a).

In both conversation, formal interview and – as examples attest - in writing, Oliver was known to become animated, given to outraged outbursts and cries of indignation. Oliver's oratory devices were

---

<sup>28</sup> In 2000, for example, the artist James D. Robertson attempted to prevent Oliver reviewing his retrospective exhibition at Glasgow School of Art.

frequently translated into her texts, as though she is literally speaking directly to us, the readers. The groans of irritation and the characteristic gesture of her hand slapping the table in annoyance are conveyed all too tellingly in some reviews. In 1965, for example, writing of a Joan Eardley exhibition (described as ‘meeting the critical gaze without a blush’), even Oliver’s use of punctuation seemed to ooze disdain for unnamed critics, referred to thus:

The Eardley exhibition (oddly enough, the first in Glasgow since the forties, except for a large memorial show) now at the New Charing Cross Gallery, gives us only a part of her work, but I think it is a very important part – now, more than ever, when so much is written about her ‘intuitive’ or ‘instinctive’ method of painting, as though she simply worked herself into the appropriate emotional state, and hey presto! another painting materialised. What nonsense! (Oliver, 1965b).

Another trait which galvanised Oliver’s critical reputation, but which again did little to endear her to her subjects, was her regular habit of offering advice to artists, almost in the manner of Hans Hoffman’s famous critiques. Even in the years following her retirement from regular criticism in the early 2000s, Oliver would offer advice to students at art school exhibitions and degree shows. This unsolicited advice, intended as constructive criticism, was not always welcomed by the artists concerned. In rare cases, the correctives offered by Oliver proved to be wholly unpalatable, reflected in an equally unforgiving nickname, Cod Liver Oil. Some artists, however, proved more receptive:

She once wrote something about Alasdair Gray and though she liked the show as a whole she made one or two minor criticisms. After that she got several letters from his friends complaining about what she’d written but Alasdair Gray came to see her after that and told her he appreciated her comments and took them on board (Chambers, 2010).

## **Into the 1970s**

I have lived through the surge of so-called conceptual art without any problem – Joseph Beuys and Tadyeus Kantor, to name just two [...] were obviously powerful and influential artists both



in vision and creative intelligence (hands-on as well as intellectual) and both, as it happens, were extremely fine draughtsmen (Oliver, 2004, p.154).

In the late 1960s a shift of focus appeared in Oliver's art criticism, due partly to the inevitable development of art practice itself but also, it should be noted, due to her increasing interest in Richard Demarco's activities in Edinburgh. Where, up to the mid '60s, Oliver had concentrated primarily on Scottish painting in her art criticism, her interest in the new directions in Demarco's own endeavours brought a new direction also for Oliver in terms of the scope and range of contemporary art covered in her reviews. Although opinions on Demarco himself were divided, veering, as Oliver has noted, between 'admiration and malice' in Edinburgh, the exhibitions he organised in the late 1960s and 1970s offered rare opportunities for audiences in Scotland to observe at first hand broader shifts in art practice and theory.

Whilst never abandoning her love of traditional disciplines, particularly painting, Oliver was receptive towards experimental and avant-garde 'post-medium specific' practices which characterised much work made in response to the crisis experienced by Modernism in the late 1960s. However, whilst such work dominated galleries and art discourse in Europe and North America, there was little evidence of these emerging practices in Scotland. The renewed emphasis on the first-hand experience of the viewer which accompanied such work was reflected in Oliver's critical approach. In her encounters with installation art and other expanded forms of sculpture, for example, Oliver relied upon her understanding of theatre, as I shall discuss, to make sense of works which for many contemporary critics were bemusing and bewildering. (Nicholas Fairbairn, on the BBC Radio Programme *Orbit*, for example, described the 1070 *Strategy: Get Arts* exhibition – discussed in detail from page 60 onwards - as arrogant, with the artwork substituted by the artist. Debate also raged in the letters pages of the broadsheets. The adjectives 'sick', 'sad', 'obscene' and 'crude' were used by one correspondent to *The Scotsman*.)

Oliver's critical principles, when paralleled with contemporary art theory of the period, resist categorisation. Whilst she continued to privilege painting over all other forms of visual art, and to a degree maintained a quasi-formalist approach to her criticism of drawing and painting (for instance, in terms of value judgements on wall-based work technique and skill remained a priority), Oliver simultaneously embraced the notion of 'theatre' and the dissolving of boundaries between the arts which positioned her in opposition to Modernist theories of sculpture and painting as espoused by

critics such as Michael Fried and related Modernist critics. Oliver's critical mode and understanding of the function of criticism and its relationship with its readership, however, remained resolutely in keeping with Modernist art criticism – certainly, nowhere in Oliver's writing is there recourse to the relativism identifiable in later postmodernist criticism. Likewise, there is little evidence in Oliver's writing in this period or any other of the theory-laden and explicitly politicised criticism which began to be seen in Anglophone art criticism in the late 1970s and 1980s, resulting in part from the rise and dominance of critical postmodernism (represented by critics around the *October* school in the US, and *Block* magazine in the UK, for example). In Scotland, art criticism and writing primarily concerned with the social and political role of art was clearly evidenced in the writings of Ken Currie and Malcolm Dickson in the 1980s but again, little can be seen in Oliver's writing of such direct engagement with the politics of representation which would characterise British and US art criticism and theory in the period. Similarly, whilst there are elements of an interest in form and style in Oliver's occasional use of poetic language and tone, her work bears little comparison with the overtly stylised writerly 'artwriting' which appeared in the 1990s in Scotland, as seen in the writings of John Calcutt, Will Bradley and Francis McKee, amongst others.

As I discussed earlier, Oliver's interest in inter- and multi-disciplinary forms of art can be seen throughout her writing but the exhibitions and works she discussed in the 1970s offered her specific opportunities to address these ideas in detail. In an article written in 1970 she acknowledged Demarco's role in facilitating audience access to such 'new genre' work: 'If you believe, as I do, that to form balanced judgements you must see at first hand the newest art concepts as well as the proved masterworks in the national gallery, then the more Richard Demarco galleries there are, the better' (Oliver, 1970a, p.8).

As Giles Sutherland recently noted in *The Scotsman*, 'at certain junctures Oliver's career was intertwined with Demarco's and she offered generous but not uncritical support to the young entrepreneur's burgeoning and increasingly ambitious activities' (Sutherland, 2010). (I will go on to discuss Demarco's own role in the development of a body of critical writing and publishing in the 1960s and '70s but it is useful at this point to briefly discuss Demarco's impact on Oliver's criticism in particular.)

In retrospect, or in conversation with either figure, it might seem that Oliver offered unswerving support to all of Demarco's exhibitions and events, but, as friends of Oliver's remember, the beginning of their

professional allegiance was far from straightforward. Early in his career Demarco had recognised a potentially important ally in Oliver and strategically set out to court her attention, with little initial success:

Richard Demarco was really pushy when he was establishing himself. He was always trying to make contacts and establish meetings and collaborations. Cordelia was irritated by him and thought he was going to use her as just another contact. He had been constantly trying to involve her and she was avoiding him. She was quite resistant to talking to him, quite resistant. Eventually George [Oliver] overcame her resistance and said 'Do please talk to him and have a look at what he's doing. Give him a chance – he's enthusiastic' (Chambers, 2010).

While Demarco's curatorial activities and his own work as an artist had been reviewed several times by Oliver in the 1960s his name was increasingly writ large across Oliver's reviews in the 1970s, presumably after George Oliver's diplomatic intervention on Demarco's behalf.<sup>29</sup>

Oliver herself later admitted regret over her initial dismissal of Demarco's 'pushing and cajoling' to 'put Edinburgh on the map as an art centre'. Writing of his enthusiastic intentions to start an art gallery within the Traverse Theatre, Oliver wrote: '[...] I am ashamed to remember how I listened to him expatiate on the subject, and took most of what he said to be so much hot air.' In the concluding line of the same text, however, Oliver (1970a, p.8) acknowledged that: '[...] everyone, no matter who, is grist to Demarco's mill if he thinks they can be of use', a comment which reflected her acuity in recognising the relationship for what it was. But what began as a professional allegiance grew into genuine and life-long friendship between the Olivers and Demarco. This resulted in several collaborative projects between the three, such as the critical writing and photography undertaken for the Demarco-initiated trip to Romania in 1971.

A huge proportion of Oliver's broadsheet criticism for *The Guardian* in the 1970s was devoted to coverage of Demarco's ventures. In a survey of Oliver's criticism of the period, Demarco's name appears

---

<sup>29</sup> While never as effusive in her admiration for Demarco's art as she was for his curatorial activities, Oliver was nonetheless sympathetic to any display of good draughtsmanship, believing drawing to be the most fundamental element of any artist's practice. Examples of Oliver's writing on Demarco's own work include this 1965 review: '[...] Richard Demarco has found time to produce, at the Traverse Gallery, an impeccably presented show of his own drawings and watercolours. In the former a sharp, wiry line describes, with a keen sense of their decorative possibilities, architectural subjects and landscapes often with boats and other nautical impedimenta. In his watercolours Demarco discards the line entirely and relies on gauzy blue washes that overlap as they make attractive patterns across the page' ('Edinburgh Exhibitions' *The Guardian*, 4 Sept 1965).

to an almost exhaustive degree. Whilst this demonstrates Oliver's enthusiasm for Demarco's initiatives, it also highlights the prolific, energetic nature of his work as a curator and facilitator. Undoubtedly, Oliver's interest in Demarco's projects was concurrent with his own curatorial 'epiphany', linked to his burgeoning association with Joseph Beuys and European avant-garde art and theatre, which began in 1968. It is interesting to note the parallel between these developments: as Demarco moved from the idea of a smart, Bond Street commercial gallery, Oliver's review of his exhibitions and events became visibly more enthusiastic and engaging. As the curator and artist Kathy Chambers has noted, 'I always think it is to Cordelia's everlasting credit that in the moment she saw what Richard Demarco was doing [...] she realised immediately that it was important – Abramovic, Beuys – to bring the avant-garde into galleries in Scotland' (Chambers, 2010).

Along with Oliver's critical recognition of the importance of Demarco's curatorial vision in terms of her commitment to reviewing his projects, she also played a significant role in aiding Demarco's access to other influential figures in the Scottish art world, as artist and educator Tom Chambers has recalled: 'Cordelia got Ricky to meet David Baxandall who was Director of the National Gallery and Baxandall said he would support the 'Open 100' and he involved Roland Penrose and another big heavyweight' (Chambers, 2010).

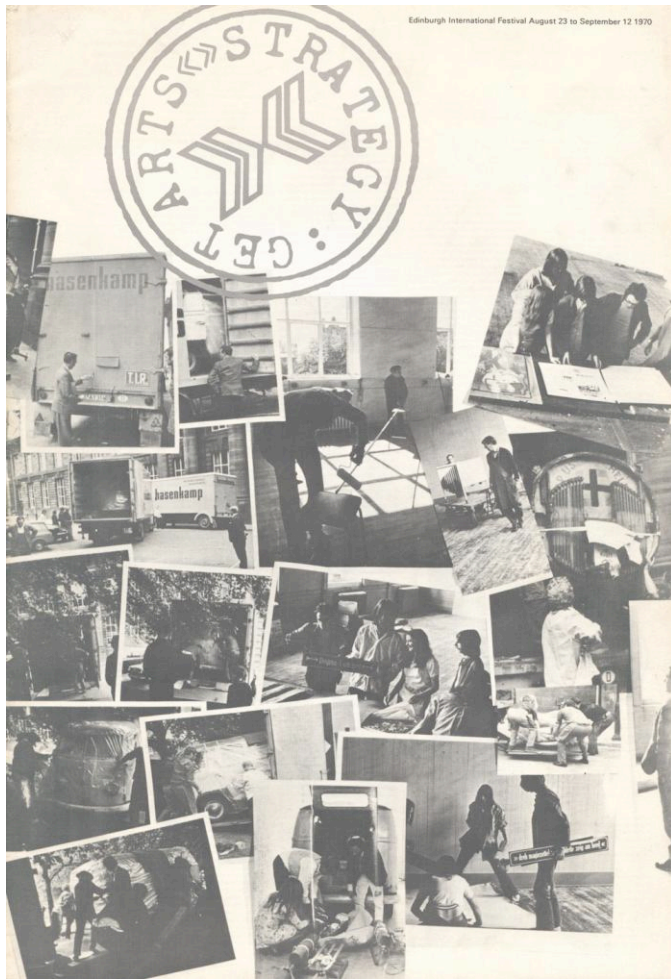


Fig. 4

*Strategy: Get Arts* catalogue cover ,  
1970 [Photograph]

The most significant single event for both Demarco's role as a curator and Oliver's as a critic was undoubtedly the 1970 landmark exhibition *Strategy: Get Arts*, held at Edinburgh College of Art. While Demarco's involvement will be discussed later, it is interesting to look in detail at Oliver's reviews of the event. In August of 1970 alone, Oliver devoted lengthy column inches to Demarco-initiated exhibitions, one a full-page profile of Demarco himself. The feature, 'Napoleon in a Scottish Pond', acts as much as a critical history of contemporary art in Scotland as it does a profile of Demarco. Accompanied by a photograph of Demarco and Joseph Beuys by George Oliver, the article summarised the 'state' of Scottish art, alluding to the insularity and laissez-faire attitudes which seemed to dominate the production, display and reception of contemporary art. 'Even', Oliver wrote, 'the Edinburgh Festival Committee [...] has taken little cognisance of later manifestations and none whatever of developments since the Second World War. [...] the Scottish Arts Council, with one or two exceptions [...] clung mostly to established and rising Scottish names for their exhibitions. Like Alan Davie and Paolozzi before them,

first the Croziers and then the Mark Boyles left swiftly for London, and no wonder' (Oliver, 1970a, p.8). Describing the influence of the Traverse and the subsequent Demarco Gallery as 'incalculable', Oliver discussed how 'the peripheral art forms of avant-garde music and theatre' had been drawn into the galleries' orbit, 'welcoming not only the committed but others who never thought to find themselves in an art gallery' (Oliver, 1970a, p.8).

Whilst enthusiastic in her response to the rapidly increasing multiplicity of practices, Oliver remained nonplussed by the critical challenge such works posed for some of her peers. And where some British journalists still maintained a resistance to the lack of overt subject matter or narrative in 'Modern' art (notably abstract painting and sculpture), Oliver began to confront art whose medium was so expanded it could not be categorised according to traditional art historical genres. In an interview Oliver was asked how she made the transition from writing about 'traditional' disciplines to being confronted with the happenings, installation and performance-based work encapsulated by the practices such as those showcased at 'Strategy: Get Arts'. Her reply emphasised not only her ability to respond to challenging, experimental new art practices, but also her continued interest in the meeting places between disciplines, seen throughout her body of critical writing:

I wrote that it was like Dada come again. I wrote about it as if it were theatre, because a lot of it was. For instance Günther Uecker wanted one of the narrow corridors. He wanted to hammer nails in and he couldn't find nails so he did it with knives. It was wonderful. And it might have been Uecker who would bang the door every five minutes. My writing about theatre was a help (Oliver, 2002).

In the extended review, 'Dada for the 'seventies', Oliver responded specifically to the exhibition for *The Guardian*, opening with an account of her reaction, as a schoolgirl, to seeing the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition in Glasgow. For Oliver, the German Expressionist works she saw in the exhibition were so memorable she regularly referred to the encounter both in conversation and in writing. For the review, she drew a direct parallel between the power of the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition and experience of 'Strategy: Get Arts':

Once, as a schoolgirl in Glasgow I saw an exhibition which because it stunned me into recognising that a proper response to art might be visceral (not merely cerebral as I suppose I had been brought up to believe). It began an awareness which I have struggled to maintain ever

since. [...] It has taken 30 years for another comparable exhibition of contemporary German art to reach Britain, and unless I am much mistaken, this one too will have its effect on those who are fortunate enough to experience it (Oliver, 1970b, p. 8).

As I have highlighted previously, Oliver often sought to contextualise potentially 'challenging' new work through reference to more established art historical precursors. From the outset, 'Strategy: Get Arts' had its opponents, not least within the host establishment, Edinburgh College of Art. Oliver's insistence on the significance of the works was vehemently expressed in her review, perhaps in an attempt to persuade and convince her readership of the importance of the exhibition through a critical 'reframing':

[...] in a sense, this is Dada come again – Dada for the '70s: a fierce, but creative imaginative and sometimes humorous reaction against the attitude which accepts as valid the pathetic remnants of a concept of art as exclusively elegant, esoteric and precious. A reaction, this, so powerful that its results are capable of stimulating by surprise, shock, or even disgust. For the point is that you look again, and with the second look begins the process of revelation (Oliver, 1970b, p.8).

As the review progresses, Oliver's enthusiasm becomes increasingly effervescent in its phrasing. Oliver's writing style in some passages seems designed not only to convey but to share with her readers some sense of the experiential, immersive works on display.<sup>30</sup>

Occasionally, what the artists are doing baffles reason, almost borders on magic. In another room Günter Weseler has set out his 'breathing objects,' furry, shaggy 'things' that heave and palpitate, pulse and flutter in curiously organic rhythms, to an insistent accompaniment of Cievas. Clinging to the walls, sulking in cages, or lying on dishes on a long red table like some unspeakable banquet, they refused to be rationalised, neither machine nor animal but a man-made form of life born of both ideas (Oliver, 1970b, p.8).

---

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted, however, that unlike many visitors to the exhibition, the Olivers, courted by Demarco, had participated fully in the 'event' of 'Strategy: Get Arts'. They were invited to attend Daniel Spoerri's *Bananatrap Dinner*, had opportunities to speak to students who had helped install the work and, due to George Oliver's role as photographer of installation images for the catalogue, spent a far greater time with the works than the average visitor.



Fig.5 Demarco, R. (1970)  
*Stefan Wewerka installation* at Edinburgh  
College of Art [Photograph].



Fig.6 Demarco, R. (1970) *Klaus Rinke, Water Jet, Strategy: Get Arts* at Edinburgh  
College of Art [Photograph].

Oliver's anthropomorphising continues beyond her description of Weseler's 'breathing objects' to encompass the exhibition as a whole, described as writing of the building itself:

The Edinburgh College of Art is a great, bleak building, impersonal in its latter-day classical style. Designers of former exhibitions have usually attempted to disguise it [...] but 'Strategy: Get Arts' (palindrome by André Thomkins) spills through and over it like a naughty child. Rinke's water sculpture snakes round and round its tank in the entrance hall, gathering for the final fountaining spout through the main door; Wewerka's deformed chairs struggle drunkenly up the main stairs (or in another mood, like wounded soldiers after a battle); and in a long stone corridor Josef Beuy's [sic] Volkswagen bus spills its load of small immacule [sic] sledges, thrusting and hurling themselves forward like lemmings to the sea (Oliver, 1970b, p.8).



If the exhibition as a whole was ‘enough to quicken the imagination on a dozen fronts’, the review is similarly imaginative in its use of poetic diction, as seen in the passage above. Not for the first time (but perhaps never veering so closely towards florid prose) Oliver’s use of the rhetorical devices such as vivid imagery, simile and metaphor bring together content and form. More than anything, though, ‘Strategy: Get Arts’ offered a new opportunity for Oliver to reassert her belief that Scottish art – as a whole and as an establishment – lacked vision. As I have discussed, in much of Oliver’s writing from the 1960s there are indications of her developing critical position and professional allegiances. She had often railed against the ‘ghastly good taste’ so prevalent in the work of Academicians, and frequently championed work she regarded as powerful rather than ‘pleasing’ (especially when such work was produced by artists from Glasgow, such as that of Patricia Douthwaite and Carole Gibbons). In ‘Dada for the ‘seventies’ Oliver wrote that the exhibition represented a ‘reaction against the attitude which accepts as valid the pathetic remnants of a concept of art as exclusively elegant, esoteric and precious’. It seems clear that this statement, as much as invoking historical forebears in Dada, was intended as a swipe at the very features that continued to characterise the Royal Scottish Academy. Oliver, as the review suggests, saw the Düsseldorf artists as inheritors of a Dada sensibility that sought to shock the bourgeois out of their apathy, to rail against complacency through provocation. The exhibition was held within an institution where many RSA members held senior positions, in the Scottish city seen by Oliver as responsible for breeding and encouraging such gentility and decorum in painting.<sup>31</sup> It seems highly likely, therefore, that for Oliver ‘Strategy: Get Arts’ was not only an innovative, experimental, genre-defying *gesamtkunstwerk*, but a much-needed wake-up call for contemporary art in Edinburgh.<sup>32</sup> At the end of the review Oliver stressed that ‘only Gunter Uecker’s corridor of knives has suffered (at official insistence) the ultimate humiliation: it has been caged for safety’s sake, as though a sense of safety were the idea’ (Oliver, 1970b, p.8).

---

<sup>31</sup> Ex-patriate Scots artists had enjoyed a profile in Düsseldorf in the same period. In 1968 Eduardo Paolozzi exhibited at the Städtische Kunsthalle whilst Alan Davie exhibited at Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen.

<sup>32</sup> In the catalogue, the artists also seemed to share this view of Edinburgh. In an interview Gerstner remarked: ‘I have no idea of Edinburgh except every year there is a terribly boring Festival there.’ Wewerka replied: ‘Weren’t we going to de-bore it a bit?’ (Demarco, 1970, p.3).



Fig.7 Oliver, G. (1970) *The Banana Trap Dinner* [Photograph]

In this review, and others which followed, Oliver's writing essentially attempted (as far as broadsheet criticism would allow) to make sense of new genre work, and to familiarise her readers with the developments and directions she identified. And while Oliver's reviews clearly never approached the rigour and taxonomical methods of theorists such as Rosalind Krauss, it is nevertheless noteworthy to consider that this writing, by a Scottish art critic, appeared almost a decade before Krauss' own identification of expanded forms of sculpture in 1979's *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*. In a short review of an open-air sculpture exhibition at Ledlanet (in grounds owned by John Calder), Oliver opened the text by acknowledging that 'large scale 3D art' was one of 'the forms which nowadays struggle to escape the term sculpture'. In Oliver's view, the placement of the works in this setting emphasised the 'open-ended nature of much modern art'. Her comments in relation to site, even in this short text, highlight her understanding of the way in which context and site can create meaning for the viewer. Employing

anthropomorphic description once again, Oliver prefaced her discussion of specific works with a broader statement on the display of large-scale sculptural works such as the ones shown at Ledlanet. Such works, she argued, had a tendency to 'look ungainly, arrogant, even, in white-painted galleries of cities. And equally on the barbered lawns of parks such pieces can look bored, invulnerable. But put Bryan Wall's huge blue-painted sheet-anchor of half-inch steel down by itself in a little overgrown wilderness and it suddenly comes alive in a new way, as though it might have been dropped there from some Martian machine and made its own earthy crater on impact (Oliver, 1970c, p.8).

Writing of monumental works by artists including Wall, Robert Laing, John Pantine and Michael Kenny, Oliver noted that 'with comparatively rare exceptions Scotland does not see this kind of work', particularly not 'good local work in a more demanding context than usual'. Always receptive to the merging and mixing of the arts, Oliver also highlighted the 'background music' of Margaret Lucy Wilkins, 'a kind of aural equivalent of the works we see' (Oliver, 1970c, p.8).

In 1972 she wrote an extended article on the work of the US conceptual artist and curator Thomas Marioni, invited to Edinburgh by Demarco, in which she discussed his interest in an inter- and multi-disciplinary approach to practice. Oliver herself had attempted to study sculpture alongside painting as a student at Glasgow School of Art and had written several times of her frustration at being prevented from experimenting across disciplines, which perhaps reveals her response to practitioners who had successfully managed to explore disciplines beyond their 'specialism' (see, for instance, Oliver, 2001 and Oliver, 2006b, pp.23-26). In her introduction to the feature, Oliver asked 'what is there left for the pioneering spirit to do but help extend the boundaries of the arts?' Like Oliver, Marioni had experienced difficulties in trying to work across disparate disciplines and departments whilst at art school but 'somehow he got away with it', being an artist 'for whom sound *and* vision are properly, interdependent parts of an art experience'. Oliver's handling of the subject matter in the Marioni feature is impressive, particularly in her use of straightforward, succinct interview questions (which invited straightforward, succinct answers) to present admirably clear definitions of various manifestations of conceptual art (sound art, performance) for her readers (Oliver, 1972, p.8).

In 1974 Oliver was gratified that, 'at long last' the Edinburgh Festival 'has come around to offering as its main exhibition a display of contemporary art' held at the Royal Scottish Academy. 'Aachen International 70/74' 'gave Scotland its first taste of Super-realism'. Oliver's response to the work was

mixed yet she clearly understood the broader shifts that had brought such work into being, as well as being conversant with the language of photography itself, a medium she rarely addressed :

All too often the message seems scarcely worth the vast expenditure of material, time and technique. It is true that people in general too easily 'take for real' the conventions of photography, the reduction and flattening of tones, the distortions, the frozen-moment effects which, in life, the eye never sees. So it is easy to understand why certain painters today, reacting against abstraction and the cult of the precious art object, and being acutely aware of these photographic conventions, have felt moved to use the photographic 'reality' as their springboard, blowing up the resultant painting to gigantic proportions for various reasons, but principally to emphasise their public, poster-like nature as art works (Oliver, 1974, p.6).

Oliver's acuity in responding to emerging directions in art can be seen in numerous other reviews throughout the 1970s. Undoubtedly, though not exclusively, many of Oliver's reviews of emerging directions in contemporary art were linked directly to Demarco. But if Demarco owed much of his public support to Oliver's championing of his numerous causes, Oliver, for her part, was similarly indebted to Demarco (and later, Tom McGrath and Chris Carrell at the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow) for the opportunity to expand the scope of her critical enquiry by exhibiting progressive and truly contemporary work in Scotland.

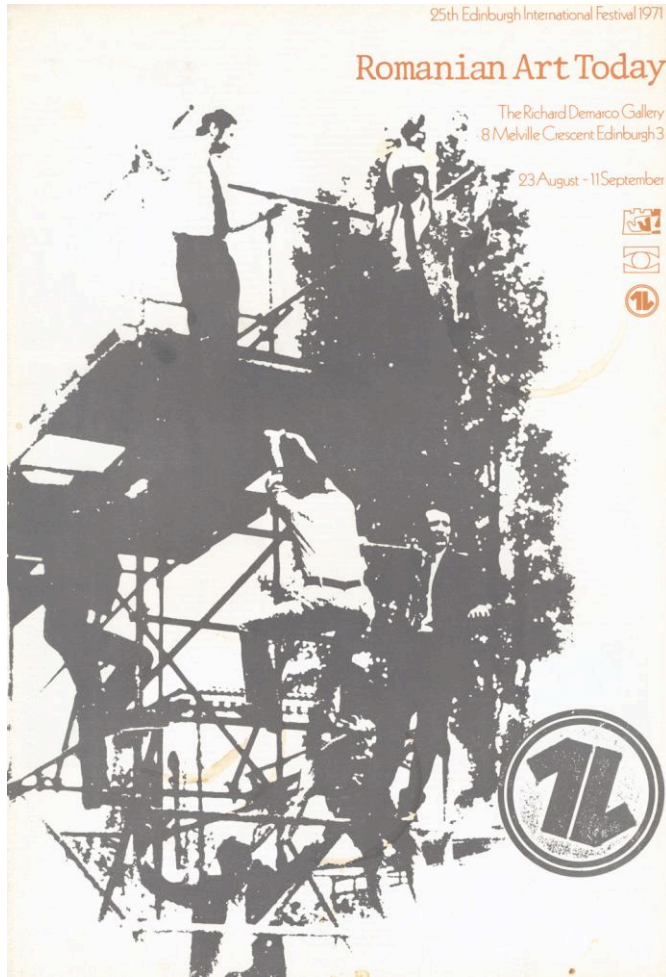


Fig.8 *Romanian Art Today* (1971)  
[Photograph of exhibition catalogue cover].

Along with her broadsheet reviews of Demarco-initiated exhibitions and events, Oliver was commissioned to write several catalogue essays for Demarco Gallery publications in the '70s. In 1971 she wrote an extensive essay for the large-format catalogue *Romanian Art Today*, published to accompany the Demarco Gallery exhibition of the same name. After being commissioned to write the essay, Cordelia and George Oliver travelled overland to Romania (some of George Oliver's photographs were published in the catalogue). As Oliver has noted, 'Ricky asked me if I would write the catalogue and it meant me going to Romania. Of course he had no money to pay for me to go to Romania but he told me that if I could get there I'd be looked after' (Oliver, 2002).

The resulting essay relied heavily on Oliver's account of her time there. Throughout the text reference is made to her first-hand observations of Romanian art and culture. These references, to folk culture, architecture, design, craft and people, serve to contextualise and historicise the contemporary works,

offering unusual and compelling points of access for the viewer. The exhibition continued Demarco's interest in Eastern European art. Oliver had already reviewed an exhibition of Romanian art which had been held in 1969 at the Demarco Gallery. Her essay for *Romanian Art Today* (Oliver, 1971) began by reflecting on her response to the 1969 exhibition and reconsidering the work of artists such as Paul Neagu 'with a greater knowledge of the country'. The 'essential quality' she identified in the work of Romanian artists she considered was 'that of being both contemporary in style and mood, and yet rooted in the past; it is an enviable quality of seeming able to find endless sustenance in native experience and traditions [...] yet so little concerned with following current fashion.' Oliver focused specifically on the links she saw between the 'popular creative vitality' of Romanian folk and peasant culture and its impact on contemporary art, a perspective amplified by Neagu's own views on the role of art in Romanian education. She highlighted that many of Romania's 'best artists are [...] of peasant origin', and made direct links between this, her observation of the ubiquity of folk art and craft and design throughout Romanian visual culture (of which numerous, extensive examples are presented) and her interpretation of the contemporary works themselves:

Neagu's work, as one watched it develop, began to suggest that this was so in his own case. The wholehearted attempt to communicate a belief in the necessity for a 'palpable art' in which touch, taste and smell were every bit as important as vision, could only have come from an artist in touch with the physical realities of life, as peasant races must be. But art, one need hardly say, depends on much more than primitive sensory experience. First-hand knowledge of the phenomenal means of transmuting experience into art is also a necessity (Oliver, 1971, p7).

Aside from her book-length projects, the Romanian essay was one of the longest pieces of writing and probably the longest text in Oliver's career to this point. As a result, Oliver was able to indulge at greater length her characteristic use of analogy, parallel and association in her discussion of the works. And whilst the strength of her reviews and shorter texts often lies in their pithy evaluation and succinctness of expression, the 1971 essay allows for a more expansive, and deeper, level of interpretation. Along with the extended word count, it is clear that Oliver had a far greater opportunity in terms of time to reflect and consider the works and that her time in the country had increased her 'sympathy and understanding'. In relation to this point, it is worth noting the limitations faced by critics such as Oliver. In this period Oliver would often (particularly during the Edinburgh Festival) phone the *Guardian* office to dictate a review on the evening of the day she had attended an exhibition. The point here is that

Oliver was faced with attempting to deal with work which had very few, if any, precedents in Scotland and to engage with innovative, challenging work often by 'unknowns' with little or no time for research, reflection or self-editing. She often dictated her immediate response directly to a typist for publication the following morning. The practical constraints of working in this way are at odds with current critical practice in which, even given an extremely tight deadline, critics are able to 'research' the basic facts and information via the internet, edit their work quickly using computer software and email their copy just before the deadline. The immediacy of Oliver's working process perhaps underpins her style and tone which bears no resemblance to the highly stylised practices of some contemporary critics.



Fig.9

Oliver, G. (1971) *Cordelia Oliver and Pavel Ilie in Ilie's studio, Bucharest* [Photograph].

To return to the Romanian essay, in attempting to summarise and draw out the key aspects of each artist's work, 'eleven Romanian artists [...] very different in style and content', Oliver was faced with a difficult task, even with the opportunity to write far more than would usually be available in her

broadsheet reviews. First of all, the essay was essentially written as a kind of preview of the Edinburgh exhibition, anticipating how the works she saw in each artist's studio might be displayed or recomposed in the gallery. Secondly, whilst 'most of them have in common three qualities; curiosity, humour and artistic integrity', the visual manifestation of these qualities ranged through proposals and preparatory work for films (Pavel Ilie), printmaking (Radu Dragomirescu), kinetic sculpture (Ovidiu Maitec), multi-media works in 2 and 3D (Ion Bitzan) and early cybernetic art (Serban Epure). She visited each artist in his studio in Bucharest as 'it seemed imperative to meet them and see where they worked, surrounded by all those possessions which artists invariably accumulate, and from which they draw stimulus; which can, in any case, tell so much about their aims and interests' (Oliver, 1971, p.8). The insistence of the links between peasant culture and contemporary art seem to have been reiterated for Oliver during these visits, as she continued to see examples of folk art and craft displayed in many of the studios (icons exhibited in the studio of Ion Pacea; an antique peasant's adze in Maitec's studio; a carved wooden spinning wheel on the wall of Bitzan's studio). Whether directly, as found objects, such as the collection of rugs and carpets to be hung alongside Pacea's paintings, or through reference and association, Oliver identified a symbiotic relationship between traditional and contemporary visual culture in Romania, and much of the essay is devoted to highlighting these parallels.

Oliver also occasionally alludes to the physical conditions under which some of these artists (Horea Bernea, Serban Epure and Dieter Sayler) were working: 'the microscopic allotments of space in which they not only work but also live', producing work not in 'studios as most artists here would think of them'. She is also at pains to acknowledge her own developing understanding of Romanian art and the way in which assumptions about this 'exotic' artistic hinterland had been challenged, both for the better and worse. While Oliver's description of Romanian culture occasionally veers towards categorising the artists and their works in terms of 'otherness', she pulls herself back from such reductive framing through the acknowledgement that 'none of the artists here is working in the wilderness. All have been recognised in one way or another – by prizes or important commissions' (Oliver, 1971, p.8).

Similarly, in her attempt to be representative and to take seriously her role of introducing Romanian art to a Scottish audience, she insisted that it must 'be understood straight away that this is no random sample of modern Romanian artists [...] I saw plenty of evidence that in Romania, as in Scotland, a wide range of style and content exists in painting and sculpture; bad and good; backward-looking, inward-looking and looking nowhere in particular' (Oliver, 1971, p.8). In an attempt to contextualise the work



she had been commissioned to discuss, and how it could be located within Romanian contemporary art more broadly, Oliver wrote that an exhibition she had seen in a hotel foyer had ‘rivalled anything we could produce of the kind in its polite banality’. Likewise, a film she was shown of one of the major exhibitions held annually in Bucharest prompted her to comment that ‘allowing for certain differences in “accent” I might have been looking at work in an average Royal Scottish Academy exhibition’ (Oliver, 1971, p.8).



Fig.10 Oliver, G. (1971) *Exterior of the Richard Demarco Gallery* [Photograph].

In spite of the length of the text, and the freedom this allowed Oliver to expand on her key points, her writing for the catalogue bore many similarities to shorter reviews and texts seen in her newspaper criticism. It relies, like almost all of Oliver’s writing, on the use of a first person narrative in which the reader is being addressed directly. The use of personal pronouns in Oliver’s criticism can sometimes

lead, in style, to an almost anecdotal account of the writer's encounter with the works. Much art writing of the period, in journalistic criticism in particular, adopted a similar tone, the sense of the writing as an informal monologue. Oliver's writing regularly drew on reminiscences and asked rhetorical questions – expressions such as 'surely one remembers' are frequently used. This critical mode dates Oliver's writing and perhaps made her later writing (from the late 1980s onwards) seem rather quaint or archaic in its delivery, however illuminating, even pioneering the content. These stylistic features of Oliver's writing are interesting in the context of situating her criticism, as I have, as broadly that of a didactic Modernist. Whilst her writing is undoubtedly trenchant and forthright in terms of her evaluation and assessment of works, and invariably takes a 'position' on the works discussed, there is often a simultaneous acknowledgement that the opinions she presents are personal and subjective. The awareness on her part that her interpretation of art works stands for one amongst many possible readings, however, does not indicate that Oliver's critical stance is humble or self-effacing. There is an authority and self-assuredness in Oliver's delivery that makes it clear in many cases that she considers her viewpoint to be correct, even if it is just one of several perspectives. And as I have demonstrated, these views, sometimes, could be dogmatic in their expression. Again, then, Oliver's writing is difficult to categorise in terms of broader shifts in criticism and theory. What is significant, however, is her self-reflexivity as a critic which is demonstrated time and time again in her writing. In *Magic in the Gorbals*, her book on the history of the Citizens' Theatre, Oliver herself took on the task of analysing the work of her fellow critics, including the *Glasgow Herald's* Christopher Small. Chapter Three was prefaced with a quote by Whistler which could be taken as representative of Oliver's own view of the job of critical writing: 'You should not say "It is not good": You should say you do not like it: then you are perfectly safe' (Oliver, 1999, p.39).

## ***Scottish International* and the Art School Debate**

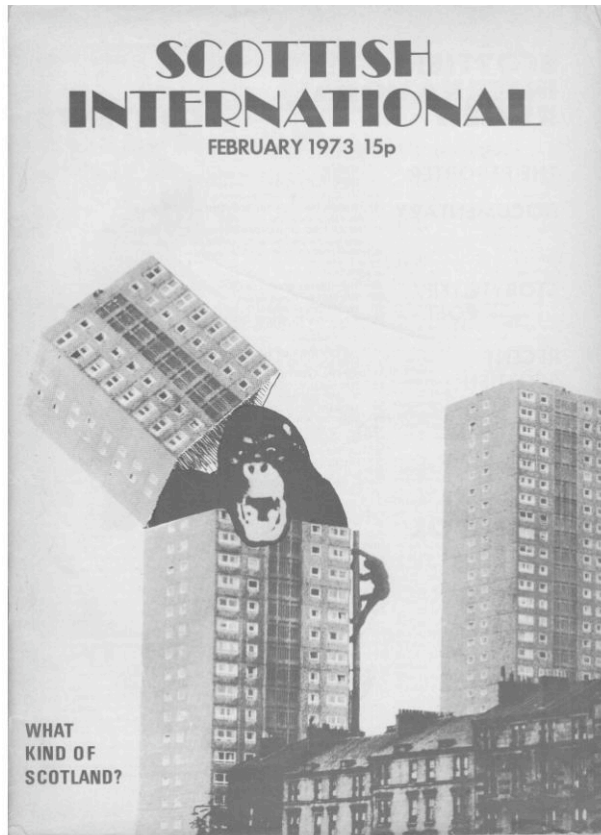


Fig.11 Cover of *Scottish International* (February 1973)

Whilst the vast majority of Oliver's art criticism was written in the 1960s and '70s, for *The Guardian* and other broadsheets, she also wrote regularly across a range of publications, from catalogue essays and gallery texts (such as those for Demarco) to features and articles in magazines and journals. One of these was the short-lived but influential *Scottish International*, a cross-cultural journal which ran from 1968 to 1974. *Scottish International's* title neatly encapsulated the desire felt by figures such as Oliver, Moffat and Demarco to be both Scottish *and* international. As Neil Mulholland has noted:

This desire to be both Scottish and international had its most powerful advocates in the magazine *Scottish International*. [...] *Scottish International* showcased the literati of the 60s who gravitated around Edinburgh's Milne's Bar (Hugh MacDiarmid, Norman MacCaig, Iain Crichton

Smith, George Mackay Brown, Robert Garioch, Sorley MacLean and Edwin Morgan) as well as the work of then lesser known Glasgow writers such as [Alasdair] Gray (Mulholland, 2009).

In terms of Oliver's relationship with the journal, she recalled:

The first editor, Bob Tait, was a friend of mine. It was he who started it and the first things I did were about Ricky Demarco and Scottish Opera. I did a piece on the art schools and it was because Merylin Smith read that article that I became involved with the Ceramic Workshop, a project with which she was closely involved at that time. *Scottish International* was very much a left-wing magazine (Oliver, 2006b, p.24).

Oliver became a regular contributor to the magazine in the early 1970s, writing features and articles on Patricia Douthwaite and Mary Martin, the role of the visual arts in the Edinburgh Festival, and the work of Arthur Boyd, amongst other subjects. The 'piece on the art schools', provocatively titled 'What is to be Done About the Art Schools?', was published in May 1970 and generated fierce debate, which in written form was rare in Scotland outside the occasional heated response in the letters pages of the broadsheets. In a preface to the publication of two lengthy rejoinders to Oliver's article in the subsequent issue of *Scottish International*, the editor noted:

Cordelia Oliver's criticisms of the Art Schools (S.I.10) have aroused more controversy about art education in Scotland than anything else for years. Responses to the criticisms have been very favourable from some quarters, from others hotly indignant. It is fair to report, however, that a number of people have seemed reluctant to make their views public. [...] In her original piece Cordelia Oliver criticised the schools on a wide variety of grounds: size, insularity in attitudes, the nature of 'the general course.' But at the core of her piece, she was complaining that the set-up in Scotland actually inhibits fresh thinking about the changing concepts and functions of art and artists in the twentieth century (Tait, 1970, p.50).

The published responses, by Peter Regent, then Head of the Liberal Studies Department at Dundee College of Art, and H. Jefferson Barnes, Director of Glasgow School of Art, were lengthy diatribes which attempted to address each of Oliver's criticisms point by point. In Regent's response Oliver is repeatedly referred to as 'Miss Oliver' (Regent, 1970, pp.50-52) and the tone of both letters was of undisguised fury which manifested itself in a kind of rhetorical point-scoring, dripping with condescension.

Regardless of their tone, though, Regent and Barnes undoubtedly touched on some truths in relation to Oliver's rather entrenched and perhaps oversimplified views of how art schools – and tutors – should operate.<sup>33</sup> Aside from the points of the argument itself, however, Oliver's article demonstrated both her gift for polemical writing and her ability to craft prose in such a way that, like good design, the form itself goes unnoticed and the reader's focus is firmly on content. Oliver's ability to hone an argument and to present her position without labouring her points was impressive. As she noted (referring to Reg Butler's claim 'that, in art, to adjust is to die'), overstatement is the common pitfall of the polemicist, and while many of her texts are provocative they resist being antagonistic. The over-heated responses to the text belie the fact that Oliver's own article is, in fact, fairly balanced – along with the complaints and concerns raised she also offers praise and congratulations on what she sees as successes in the art schools. There is an undeniable element of baiting in the text (in the introduction she acknowledges that the article has been written 'even at the risk of making enemies') but Oliver's criticisms seem designed to be constructive rather than purely oppositional and the reader can be left in no doubt that this is no mere exercise in complaint for complaint's sake but rather, as Oliver claims in the first paragraph, that 'the problem desperately needed airing and someone must take the first step'.

The article itself, and the responses to it, are too lengthy to discuss in detail here but some key features of Oliver's writing and critical approach reveal themselves in the piece. This text, perhaps more than any other up to this point, typifies Oliver's reputation as an emerging voice of dissent. In the text we do not merely see the stereotypical opposition between the 'auld enemies' of critic and disgruntled artist. Rather, we see Oliver's developing voice as a critic who is unafraid to address broader issues surrounding the power structures and the political state of play in the Scottish art world. Clearly, there are far earlier instances in her writing of Oliver's willingness to criticise institutions and organisations such as the Royal Scottish Academy. However, rather than becoming milder, more complacent or even jaded as her career progressed, Oliver's oppositionality, and, at times, anti-establishment stance, became increasingly more vociferous. In terms of her art world standing and reputation, Oliver was clearly not in the same company as younger 'rabble rousers' such as Alexander Moffat, John Bellany and Robert Crozier in their challenges to the authority of art schools and academies in writings and events of

---

<sup>33</sup> For example, much of Oliver's argument is clearly informed by her experience of studying at Glasgow School of Art in the early 1940s. As such, some of her points could be deemed moot given the very unique experience of studying during World War Two, a context not comparable with any other period of art school education in Scotland. See Hartley, 1989 for more on this.

the mid-'60s. Oliver was an established, respected (and respectable) upper middle class woman, a close friend and associate of senior figures in the art world (David Baxandall, for example, admired her writing) she had begun to work as a freelance curator and lecturer for the Scottish Arts Council, was a member of the Williams Committee and her primary occupation was Scottish correspondent for *The Guardian*, not the self-published voice of student dissent. Again, then, Oliver's position is difficult to pigeonhole and her relationship to the art world complex and paradoxical.<sup>34</sup>

Despite her criticism of the insularity of the art schools, it seems reasonable to assume that there may have been some resentment on Oliver's part that this insularity had not extended to her. According to friends, Oliver found it irritating that she had not been invited to teach at her *alma mater* – certainly, Oliver's fierce animosity towards many of the teaching staff at Glasgow School of Art, and to the institution as a whole, was well-known and frequently publicly expressed until the end of her life (Chambers, 2010). Regardless of his rather spiteful tone, then, Barnes was undoubtedly correct in recognising that, in Oliver's text, 'Glasgow takes the hardest knocks; perhaps because of the peculiar love/hate relationship between the writer and her old school' (Barnes, 1970, pp.52-53). Nevertheless, Oliver's comments proved prescient. Many of the issues raised in the article remain hotly contested issues for art schools and art education today and the text's relevance over thirty years later was highlighted when the 1970 text was republished in in the pages of the one-off journal *Free Association* (Oliver, 2006b, pp.42-45), edited by Malcolm Dickson.

Like the debate spurned by Alexander Moffat's article on New Image Glasgow in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review* in the 1980s, Oliver's writing for *Scottish International* highlighted not only the key issues for Scottish art and artists, but the relative lack of written debate or resistance to the status quo elsewhere. The very fact that discourse and debate was so infrequent perhaps explains the level of outrage expressed in response to both texts.

---

<sup>34</sup> Oliver may have arrived at some of her criticisms of the art schools' resistance to change as a result of Edinburgh College of Art's wholehearted, and publicly known, disdain for Demarco's landmark *Strategy: Get Arts* exhibition held at the College in 1970. According to Andrew Gibbon Williams and Andrew Brown 'Edinburgh College of Art [...] was outraged (the governors decided to mount an exhibition of Edinburgh School work the following year as a riposte' (Brown and Gibbon Williams, 1993, p.208). Similarly, during the recent restoration of Blinky Palermo's *Blue/Yellow/Red/White* in the central stairwell of Edinburgh College of Art - originally installed as part of the *Strategy: Get Arts* exhibition but hastily painted over following the close of the show - Andrew Patrizio claimed that the 'college authorities at the time wouldn't have rated it as an artwork' (Patrizio, 2004).

## Curating and Catalogue Essays

The 1970s saw the development of Oliver's career as a freelance curator, or, as she would have it, a 'maker of exhibitions'.<sup>35</sup> Oliver's interest in curating was regularly expressed in her reviews, which were often as critical of a curatorial premise or the installation of an exhibition as they were of specific works. While Oliver's role as a curator is not the focus of this research, the critical connections between the two practices are clear. For this reason, a brief discussion of Oliver's curatorial practice is included here.

From the 1970s to the early '90s Oliver worked intermittently as a freelance curator and critical writer for Glasgow's Third Eye Centre (later the Centre for Contemporary Arts) which had begun life as the gallery space of the Scottish Arts Council at 5 Blythswood Square (initially sharing a building with the Lady Artists' Club). Oliver had been a founder member of the Third Eye and remained on the Board for a number of years after the Centre moved from Blythswood Square to new, larger premises at 350 Sauchiehall Street (the former Walpamur wallpaper warehouse). She enjoyed close working relationships with the Centre's first director, Tom McGrath, from 1974 to 1977 and his successor Christopher Carrell, who remained as Director until the closure of the Centre in 1991.

Carrell in particular has been credited as being a key figure in the development of a body of critical writing on Scottish art because of his publishing initiatives at the Third Eye. The Third Eye's commitment to publishing can be seen as a development of McGrath's earlier interest in publishing gallery freesheets such as *Glasgow NuSpeak* and to Oliver's own involvement as a founding committee member. Whilst McGrath's interest in writing and publishing were undoubtedly significant for Scottish art and culture, especially poetry and theatre, Carrell's role was pivotal in the development of distributing and

---

<sup>35</sup> Oliver curated a number of significant exhibitions for the Scottish Arts Council, including an important retrospective of the 'Glasgow Girl' Jessie M. King in 1971 and a major group exhibition, *Painters in Parallel*, held at Edinburgh College of Art in 1978. Both exhibitions were accompanied by substantial catalogues, with essays written by Oliver. The *Painters in Parallel* exhibition was described by Oliver (Oliver, 1978, p.1) as 'the fruit of more than thirty years of looking with interest at Scottish painting (nearly twenty of these spent as a working critic or reporter and before that, more than ten as an active worker in the field)'. Bringing together the work of seventy-six painters, the exhibition represented Oliver's breadth of experience and knowledge, and gave her the opportunity to bring together artists she had long supported, such as Mardi Barrie, Richard Demarco, Hugh Adam Crawford, Carole Gibbons, Joan Eardley, Bet Low, Tom Macdonald and Margot Sandeman. Whilst being 'catholic' in its range, and paying due respect to the elder statesmen of Scottish Art, the exhibition also revealed Oliver's bias, specifically her loyalty to her own generation of Glasgow-based painters.

disseminating writing about art through the Third Eye Centre bookshop and in the publishing of regular Third Eye Centre exhibition catalogues and related publications.

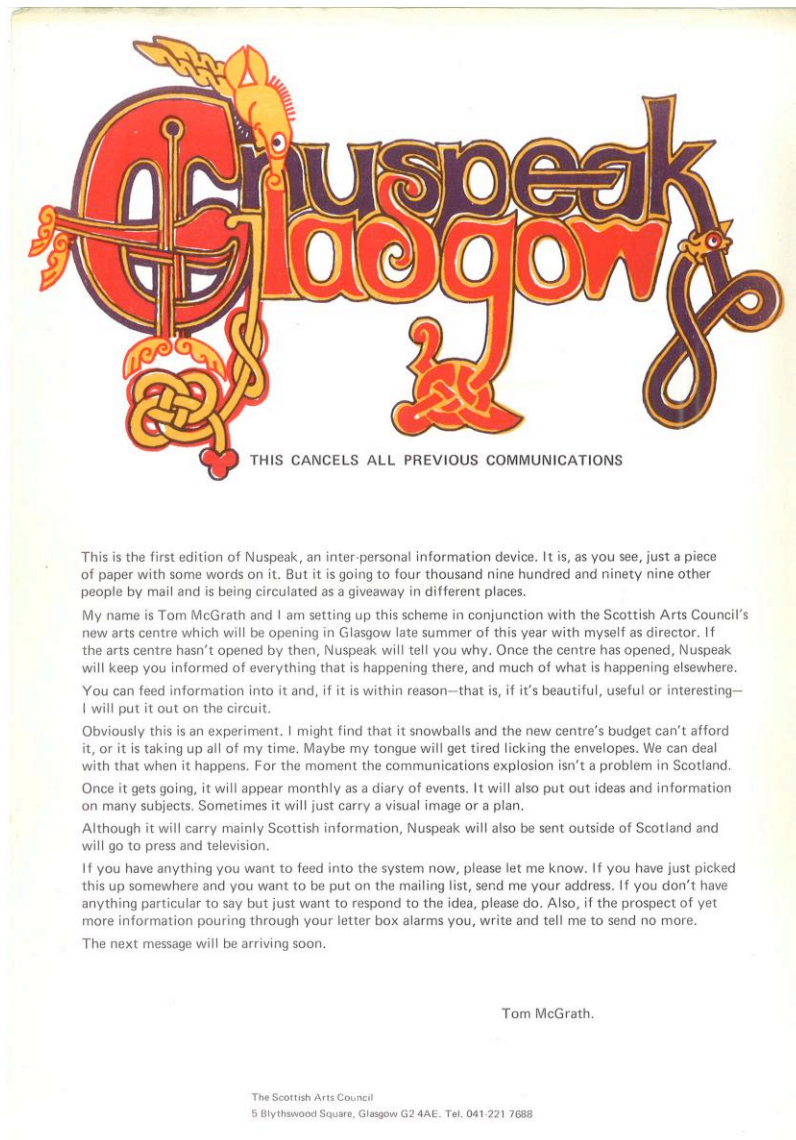


Fig.12 Tom McGrath's  
*Glasgow NuSpeak*  
Third Eye Centre fresheet

What Demarco and Moffat had done for Edinburgh from the late 1960s onwards in terms of exhibition catalogue writing and publishing, Carrell did in turn for Glasgow in the late 1970s and '80s. At various times at the Third Eye Centre, Moffat and Oliver were commissioned by Carrell as curators and critics. According to Oliver, however, Carrell's appointment was met with reservation by some board members: 'there were some on the Board who didn't want him because he was interested in publishing [...] and



they said, “this is an arts centre, not a publishing house” (Oliver, 2006b, p.25). The negative response to Carrell, based specifically on his interest in publishing, again underlines the continuing resistance towards the role of arts writing and publishing in Scotland in the '70s and '80s. The view that an arts centre and publishing somehow presented a conflict or were mutually exclusive emphasises the lack of regard towards writing on the part of even key figures in the art world in Scotland. One of the residing memories of the Third Eye Centre today, however, is the bookshop started by Carrell.

The bookshop which Carrell started was just great. Chris published a good deal of local interest, as well as many important exhibition catalogues. When I was invited by the Goethe Institute to give a lecture on the Citizens Theatre, Robert David Macdonald and German Drama, Chris Carrell put that in print (Oliver, 2006b, p.25).<sup>36</sup>



Fig.13 *The Third Eye Centre Bookshop in the 1980s [Photograph]*

---

<sup>36</sup> See Oliver (1984) *Glasgow Citizen's Theatre: Robert David MacDonald and German Drama*, Glasgow: Third Eye Centre.

Due to the recognition – on the part of figures such as Oliver, Demarco, Moffat, McGrath and Carrell – that a written record was integral to the development of discourse on Scottish art, there was, for the first time, a sense that a body of literature on Scottish art and artists was beginning to emerge. Rather than gallery freesheets and ephemera (as significant as these are and were), Oliver, Demarco, Moffat and Carrell understood the function of the exhibition catalogue as more than a complement to the exhibition itself. They recognised that a catalogue had the potential to extend the life of an exhibition, to historicise an exhibition and to emphasise the significance of the work through critical writing which served to interpret, frame and contextualise the works on display. And they showed remarkable foresight in their understanding of the way in which catalogue essays could form part of an ongoing critical archive, particularly in the absence of any other written discussion of art in Scotland outside the short shelf-life of journalism. A new generation of artist-writers in the 1990s immediately recognised the potential of the catalogue essay as a vehicle for both the promotion and critical analysis of Scottish art, as I shall discuss later. Ultimately, however, with the paucity of other outlets for critical writing, the catalogue essay took on a particularly significant role in Scotland as a record not only of the exhibitions themselves, but of approaches and debates to contemporary art more broadly. And as I shall go on to consider, the style and form of the catalogue essay itself became a key indicator of particular approaches to critical writing in each era.

The catalogue for *Crawford and Company* and the exhibition itself, as well as providing another platform for Oliver to extol the virtues of art school education in the 1940s, essentially acted as a tribute to Oliver's former tutor Hugh Adam Crawford. At the same time, though, it revealed something of Oliver's self-reflexivity as a critic and presented her with the opportunity to discuss this explicitly:

I myself would like to put it on record that, in getting to grips with the initial difficulties of becoming an art critic or reviewer, I found myself much in debt to Crawford's teaching which helped me see beyond my own immediate preferences, not to say prejudices. Certainly, I owe it to him that I was never in any doubt that, if a critic was what I was going to be, I must aim to be nothing less than a stringently honest one, no matter what (Oliver, 1978b, p.6).

Following *Crawford and Company*, Oliver's association with the Third Eye Centre continued with an exhibition and catalogue essay on Winifred Nicholson in 1979 and, in 1981, *Seven Scottish Artists*, an

exhibition of the work of Pat Douthwaite, Fiona Geddes, Carole Gibbons, Jacki Parry, June Redfern, Marilyn Smith and Kate Whiteford. Both exhibitions, and the essay for *Seven Scottish Artists* in particular, highlighted Oliver's continuing commitment to the work of women artists in Scotland (also evidenced in her continued loyalty to the work of Joan Eardley and Bet Low and in her selection for group exhibitions such as *Crawford and Company* and *Painters in Parallel*). The text for *Seven Scottish Artists* revealed Oliver's stance on defining art as 'female' or as 'women's art' and succinctly encapsulated her views on feminism and art, particularly in relation to the fact that these artists were based in Scotland. Whilst acknowledging the challenges faced by women artists (and working herself in a field almost entirely dominated by men) Oliver's position was not informed by contemporary feminist theories or perspectives, and she did not look for this in the work of the artists she supported. Rather, as Kathy Chambers has noted, Oliver was simply concerned with attempting to ensure some kind of equity for women artist in terms of their visibility in both criticism and exhibitions, which she was able to do as a critic and curator.

Cordelia felt that women should get credit for producing good work, which she didn't feel they did. She was good at reviewing people like Jacki Parry and Sam Ainsley and felt it was important that their profile was notable. As she said, when she was hired as Scottish Correspondent for the Guardian she could make choices about what she was writing. She was very, very proud of the number of women who had been showcased in the Third Eye. She felt it was important. She felt there had been significant women all the way through from Jessie King (Chambers, 2010).

In 1983 Oliver wrote a monograph of Jack Knox to accompany the Third Eye Centre retrospective exhibition of the artist's work. Like her critical biography of James Cowie, commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council and published by Edinburgh University Press in 1980, one of a series of monographs on Scottish artists, the Knox monograph was one of the first substantial publications in Scotland to consider the work of a contemporary Scottish artist in depth. The paucity of writing on Scottish art up to this point was highlighted in the publisher's note included at the beginning of the Cowie book:

The publication of these monographs came about at the instigation of the Scottish Arts Council, which felt that, apart from sporadic articles and features in the press, art journals and exhibition catalogues, there was a dearth of critical and biographical material on contemporary Scottish artists (Oliver, 1980).

Clearly, then, along with her ephemeral newspaper criticism and numerous catalogue essays, Oliver's contribution to the slowly growing body of critical writing on Scottish art was cemented by the publication of the books on James Cowie, Jack Knox, Philip Reeves and Joan Eardley in the 1980s. Though the books generally adopted the standard format of a biography, moving chronologically through a summary of the artist's life and education and quoting extensively from the artists themselves, they focused in abundant detail on the works themselves, often considering individual works at length. Like all of her criticism, then, the works themselves were pivotal to Oliver's interpretation and she consistently began her reading of the works with detailed and carefully considered visual description. In her biographical writing, Oliver managed to strike an ideal balance between her coverage of the artist's life, the context in which he/she worked and a full and remarkably perceptive account of the development of the work itself. Though rarely cited today, Oliver's biographical texts are a testament to her critical acuity and her ability to distil an artist's life and work into a written account.

In 1988 a solo exhibition and catalogue on the work of Pat Douthwaite appeared, giving Oliver the chance to consider Douthwaite's work in detail, following numerous reviews of her work published since the early 1960s. Exhibitions devoted to several other Glasgow-based artists followed, again allowing Oliver the chance to expound at length on the work of artists she had long supported and admired as a critic, such as Tom Macdonald and Bet Low. The 1986 Macdonald exhibition catalogue, like the Douthwaite show, emphasised the role of the theatre in the development of Macdonald's work and the text was illustrated with photographs of Macdonald's early set design for productions by Glasgow Unity Theatre and Glasgow Jewish Institute Players in the 1940s and '50s. Again, the works in the exhibition were selected by Oliver (in association with Bet Low), giving her extended access to the works she would discuss and continuing her interest in the links between art forms.

In the 1980s and 1990s Oliver continued her work as a critic, primarily for *The Guardian*, but after the publication of longer essays and articles in the 1970s she began to concentrate on more extensive writing projects such as her critical biographies of James Cowie (1984) and Joan Eardley (1988), her monograph on Jack Knox (1983), and histories of Scottish Opera (1987) and the Citizens Theatre (1999). Both her art and theatre criticism gradually declined in volume and by the mid-1990s she was no longer writing regularly for newspapers. Until her death in 2009, however, Oliver remained a regular

contributor to a variety of publications, with her last series of largely polemical texts written for the independent Scottish visual arts newspaper *ArtWork*, based in Aberdeen.

As a Scottish critic, Oliver's significance cannot be understated. She was crucial in establishing a body of criticism that went beyond the belle lettrist reportage which dogged Scottish broadsheets. She was instrumental in championing artists who she believed had been unfairly marginalised by the Scottish art world, namely women and figurative artists from the West of Scotland. She was an ambassador for contemporary Scottish art in UK-wide broadsheets and was a powerful advocate of Richard Demarco, lending credibility and prestige to many of his enterprises at a time when he was not taken seriously by the establishment. Furthermore, she demonstrated an unusual receptiveness to new art forms and changing directions for contemporary art, not typical of her generation, providing a critical account of the shifts in contemporary Scottish art in opposition to the laissez-faire attitudes of the academy and the art schools. As a critic, she was distinctive for her clarity of expression, her exhaustive research, the seriousness with which she treated her role as a mediator between artwork and audience and her ability to be self-reflexive. Her varied experience as a practicing artist, performer, curator, committee member and critic allowed her to draw on all of these roles in her approach to writing about visual art, resulting in a particularly rich, fertile body of criticism.

## **RICHARD DEMARCO – ‘Napoleon in a Scottish Pond’**

As I have outlined, the artist and curator Richard Demarco was a central figure in Scottish art from the late '60s onwards (and would-be 'thorn in the side' of the Edinburgh establishment). According to Demarco, the debates provoked by the events, discussions and performances that took place at both the 1962 International Writers Conference and the 1963 Drama Conference 'caused the spirit of the avant-garde to explode in the heart of the official Edinburgh Festival. It prepared the way for the Traverse Theatre and therefore the Demarco Gallery, to come into being' (Demarco, 1995, pp. 26-27). In terms of visual art, Demarco's visionary and indefatigable endeavours made way for an intense period in Edinburgh, which became a kind of UK gateway and space for experimental and sometimes wildly ambitious artists, writers and actors to perform and exhibit. The dialogues and exchanges set up by Richard Demarco forged a lasting legacy in what had become a provincial, staid and conservative art scene. Along with Alexander Moffat and Cordelia Oliver, Richard Demarco presented a rare dissenting voice in the Scottish art world in the 1960s and '70s. Through his gallery ventures, various curatorial activities and publications such as *Umbrella*, Demarco promoted, exported and acted as an ambassador for Scottish culture abroad, as well as being instrumental in bringing challenging and avant-garde artists to work and exhibit in Scotland.

Whilst working as an art teacher and practising artist, Demarco began to organise exhibitions in the vaulted basement of Jim Haynes' Paperback Bookshop and in the coffee room of the Gateway Theatre. One of the earliest Demarco-organised events at the Bookshop was a performance by Ivor Davies, a Happening using explosives as a kind of auto-destructive event which demonstrated Demarco's burgeoning interest in experimental performance and visual art. After his Paperback Bookshop activities, Demarco's first 'real' gallery space and exhibitions programme began in 1964 when the Traverse Theatre (which had opened in 1963, with Jim Haynes as a founder member) opened a dedicated exhibition space – the Traverse Gallery. The Glasgow artist Mark Boyle was one of the first artists to exhibit at the new gallery. *Mark Boyle Assemblages* was Boyle's first solo show in Scotland (and his second-ever solo show, following a small show in London the previous year) and the artist exhibited junk reliefs, continuing a similar preoccupation with junk and found objects in the lineage of Dada and contemporary US artists

such as Jasper Johns (who exhibited at the gallery in 1965) and Robert Rauschenberg.<sup>37</sup> There were very few private or commercial art galleries in Edinburgh at the time and in its first year from 1964 to 1965 the Traverse gallery sold £10,000 worth of art, lots of it in the theatre intervals. Demarco's objective for the exhibitions programme was to be international in scope and show a balance of both foreign and Scottish artists. The exhibiting artists (over ninety artists exhibited in the first three years) included Scottish artists such as Anne Redpath, Elizabeth Blackadder, William Crozier, Tom Macdonald and Alberto Morrocco and internationally renowned figures such as Graham Sutherland and Patrick Heron.

As well as the exhibitions in the Traverse, Demarco also arranged exhibitions at other Edinburgh and UK venues. By 1966 Demarco wanted to expand his operation and, with three friends from the Traverse, Andy Elliott, Jimmy Walker and John Martin, founded his eponymous gallery on Melville Street.<sup>38</sup> Demarco has described the history of his gallery in terms of 'phases'. In the introduction to the tenth anniversary catalogue of the gallery in 1976, Demarco wrote that from 1966 to 1970 the gallery was established 'in the image of the successful Bond Street Art Galleries of London' (Demarco, 1976, p.1). In 1970, though, Demarco's curatorial focus altered dramatically. Though he had long supported performance and 'expanded' sculpture in principle, the exhibitions at the Traverse Gallery and the early years of the Demarco Gallery had often tended towards wall-based work (particularly painting) and the galleries frequently exhibited work by established Scottish and English artists.

---

<sup>37</sup> The year after this exhibition at the Traverse, Boyle and his partner Joan Hills began their epic project *Journey to the Surface of the Earth*. The year before this, in 1963, the Traverse had organised a touring group exhibition to the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow which included work by Boyle. Boyle and Hills were also part of a group exhibition in Edinburgh which included work by Alexander Trocchi and Ian Hamilton Finlay.

<sup>38</sup> Sheila Ross continued the programme Demarco had set up at the Traverse, though Demarco was still Director of the gallery at the Traverse until 1967. The Traverse Committee did not want the new gallery at Melville Crescent to carry the Traverse name, which led to the name 'The Richard Demarco Gallery', though the gallery was run by Demarco and several colleagues.



Fig.14 Demarco, R. (1970) *Andre Thomkins palindrome* [Photograph]

The shift in Demarco's curatorial vision came about through his involvement with the Düsseldorf artists he had invited to exhibit at Edinburgh College of Art for the 1970 *Strategy: Get Arts* exhibition. In particular, Demarco's relationship with Joseph Beuys proved to be instrumental in redirecting Demarco's ideas about what visual art could (or should) be. Demarco had first encountered the work of Joseph Beuys at Documenta in Germany in 1968 but when Beuys first visited Scotland it would be no overstatement to say that the German artist became a kind of role model to Demarco in terms of his ethos and approach to art. Beuys's ideas radically altered Demarco's own philosophies and he has been described as both Demarco's success and failure. 'Success' came about in terms of Demarco's embrace of Beuys' notion of social sculpture and the role of art. The subsequent 'failure' could be seen in Beuys' influence on the dilution of the entrepreneurial or commercial aspirations of Demarco's enterprise.





Fig.15 Oliver, G. (1970)  
*Richard Demarco and Joseph Beuys*  
[Photograph]



Fig.16 Demarco, R. (1970) Joseph  
Beuys, *'The Pack'*, Strategy: Get Arts  
at Edinburgh College of Art

In his book *The Eye in the Wind – Contemporary Scottish Painting since 1945*, the artist and Scotsman art critic Edward Gage wrote of the impact of the exhibition:

It would be no exaggeration to say that art in Scotland was never to be quite the same again. Because of it, our national experience was enlarged, our knowledge extended and our prejudices sometimes usefully shattered...After his first encounter with Beuys, Demarco began to question his own philosophy and the image the gallery had created. Finding them rather too smart and fashionable, he decided it was time to identify with a new art and think about a new

type of exhibition space: a concept that would lend itself, perhaps, to multi-media and interdisciplinary events of all kinds (Gage, 1977, p.58).

Since the start of the Edinburgh Festival in 1947, the visual arts had always (and continue to be) massively under-represented as part of the festival programme. The *Strategy: Get Arts* exhibition, discussed earlier, was arguably the first time that the official festival programme had included a truly progressive contemporary art exhibition (as opposed to a failsafe 'blockbuster').



Fig.17 Demarco, R. (1978) *Sign for Edinburgh Arts '77* [Photograph]

'Edinburgh Arts' was a summer school set up by Demarco in 1972. It was radically different to other residential art summer schools in that it concentrated not on watercolour classes but on a diverse set of activities and subjects, from body art, video, dance and photography to discussions, interventions, literature, theatre, politics and archaeological excavations. The premise of the school was essentially to

provide a programme based on exchange and dialogue about the 'role' of art in ordinary life and how the two could intervene. A lot of the programme related to Scotland and Scottish culture in terms of history, architecture, folklore and language, and many of the participants were American art students who had come to Scotland after seeing Demarco lecture in the US on one of his lecture tours of art schools and universities in the early to mid '70s. Cutting-edge figures in contemporary art (such as Marina Abramovic) were guests and visiting lecturers to the Edinburgh Arts summer school, which was modelled in part on North Carolina's Black Mountain College. One of the key figures, unsurprisingly, was Joseph Beuys, who returned for several years as a visiting lecturer.

The summer school's ethos was very closely related to Beuys's call for a Free International University which in turn relates to earlier ideas proposed by Alexander Trocchi in the '60s. Trocchi expressed an interest in the possibility of anti-universities; education which would not be controlled by the ruling cultural elite. These 'anti-universities' were intended to side-step the cultural 'gatekeeping' and administration of the so-called establishment in order to foster an alternative education through which the arts could become a regenerative and revolutionary force in society. Both Trocchi and Beuys believed that a revolution could be brought about by culture as opposed to following party politics, a position taken up by key figures in the following generation of artists and writers in the 1980s, such as Malcolm Dickson (discussed later). The concentration on the experience of the artist, the role and purpose of art, and the commitment to the idea of the artist as a force for change or, as Beuys put it, a social sculptor, also linked in to progressive ideas already established in Scotland, such as Hugh MacDiarmid's ideas about Scottish internationalism and his philosophies on art and culture. In terms of Edinburgh Arts' programme of activities, the eclectic mix of subjects and interests can also be seen in relation to the educational theories of the early twentieth-century Scottish philosopher, botanist and urban planner Patrick Geddes. Geddes was vociferous in his promotion of ideas about crossing and merging disciplines and breaking down the boundaries between them in the pursuit of a 'synthesis of knowledge' rather than isolated specialisation. The Edinburgh Arts Summer School lasted from 1972 to 1980, with related Edinburgh Arts activities and journeys continuing in a more ad hoc manner into the 1980s. For many of the artists and students who attended the summer school, the events genuinely marked a new direction in their practice and opened up possibilities and opportunities that could have been impossible to achieve in isolation or outside Edinburgh Arts or the Demarco Gallery's encouragement and motivation.

Demarco's vision for Scottish artists and for Scotland helped to invest younger artists with the confidence that they could be involved in an international art world, that internationalism was important and that artists working in Scotland could connect with, and be part of, wider avant-garde movements. In other words, Demarco demonstrated that artists in Edinburgh (and Scotland more broadly) should regard themselves as special and unique in geographical and cultural terms but should simultaneously avoid becoming insular and regarding themselves as 'provincial' if they were to maintain their ambition and vision. Essentially, Demarco proved that Edinburgh, like Düsseldorf, Paris, London, New York and Berlin, could be a centre of art production and critical debate. As Andrew Brown and Andrew Gibbon Williams have noted:

His aim was to bring challenging contemporary foreign artists to Scotland and exhibit them alongside native talent [...] in doing so, he instigated a kind of cultural devolution. Leap-frogging London, he made a series of cultural exchanges directly with continental countries, many with Eastern Europe. [...] Part of Demarco's motivation was due to his dislike of the cultural hegemony America held over the international art scene, and so, with the help of Beuys and Karl Ruhrberg, the director of the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle, he organised [...] Strategy-get-Arts [...] This single art event shook Scotland's art establishment to its foundations. Nothing like this wide-ranging exhibition of installations, performance art and video had ever been seen anywhere else in Britain, let alone Scotland (Brown & Gibbon Williams, 1993, p.208).

Despite his attempts to develop an environment for visual art which would rival that of the theatre scene, Demarco's efforts (until very recently) were rarely appreciated by the institutions of art (such as the Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh College of Art and the Scottish Arts Council). In 1971 Edinburgh College of Art decided to organise a survey exhibition of work by students and graduates of the College looking back over 25 years. The exhibition purported to be a celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Edinburgh Festival, but more than anything, it is acknowledged that it was organised to act as a 'counterblast' or response to the previous year's *Strategy: Get Arts* exhibition (Brown and Gibbon Williams, 1993, p.208). Over 140 works were exhibited in the 1971 exhibition, several by members of the staff at the time, and the overall and central impression of the exhibition was that it highlighted a continuing tradition in the work of the 'Edinburgh School' Academy artists such as Robin Philipson, Elizabeth Blackadder, John Houston and Denis Peploe.

## Commissioning and Publishing

Demarco's impact on criticism *per se* is minimal in terms of the development in modes of criticality. Rather, his significance lies in the fact that he commissioned and published writing on art in an arid period for any kind of commentary on art. Demarco's importance can be seen simply by virtue of the fact that he (along with the painter Alexander Moffat) was amongst the first figures to publish catalogues (and accompanying texts) on Scottish artists in Scotland. Before the late '60s almost no catalogues had been produced on young and emerging Scottish artists and gallery texts were virtually non-existent, as the publisher's note to Cordelia Oliver's book on James Cowie, mentioned earlier, acknowledged.

Along with giving Scottish artists an important public forum through the exhibitions they arranged, Alexander Moffat and Richard Demarco (probably in view of developments in literature that they had observed first-hand) recognised the value of writing on art as integral to a 'healthy' and progressive community for visual art in Scotland. They also acknowledged the usefulness of publications in the promotion of Scottish art outside Scotland. Demarco and Moffat shared a fervent desire for Scottish art to be taken seriously on an international level, yet both recognised that the prevailing traditions and customs of the Scottish art establishment and the anti-intellectualism of the Academy and art schools only served to keep Scottish art in stasis. Writing about art in this period helped to create a sense of community amongst those excluded from the 'establishment' (by position, race, class, politics, youth etc.). Rather than avoiding dialogue, in service to the careworn cliché of 'allowing the work to speak for itself' Demarco and Moffat, themselves practising artists, interviewed artists, asked questions, encouraged debate, reported on exhibitions and activities and, notably, encouraged other young artists to follow suit.

Whilst never as influential or prolific as Alexander Moffat or Cordelia Oliver in terms of his writing activities, Richard Demarco played a small but significant role in the development of writing on art in Scotland. Much like Christopher Carrell's publishing endeavours at the Third Eye Centre in the late 1970s and 1980s (discussed later), Demarco was similarly committed to publishing. As the recently launched digital archive at the University of Dundee clearly demonstrates, one of Demarco's key and enduring activities was, and is, to record each and every activity, event, person or place he encountered. This almost obsessive habit, manifested most obviously through a monumental collection of photographs,

can also be seen in Demarco's attitude to recording 'history-as-it-happened' through his involvement in writing, editing, commissioning and publishing exhibition catalogues and gallery publications. Some of these, notably the *Strategy: Get Arts* catalogue of 1970, remain seminal publications in terms of recording the history of art in Scotland in the twentieth century.

Like many of the other figures discussed in relation to this period – Robert Crozier, Alan Bold, Alexander Moffat and Cordelia Oliver – Richard Demarco combined his curatorial and publishing activities with his primary role as an artist: 'Trained as an artist, he always feels himself primarily to be one (his topographical line drawings are fluent, crisp and intelligent) rather than a dealer' (Gage, 1977, p.58). In conversation with the artist Marianne Greated at the Glasgow Art Fair in 2010, Demarco stated that, above all else, 'I would describe myself first as an artist, everything else second'. Indeed, Demarco has continued his art practice and his own works were reviewed by Cordelia Oliver.<sup>39</sup>

In an interview, Oliver noted:

Ricky Demarco did more about bringing in exciting art to Scotland than anybody else. I became really friendly with him. I did some catalogue writing. He's an artist, he wrote and he's done more to open the hothouse of Scottish art than almost anybody else (Oliver, 2002).

Much has been written about Demarco's activities, not least by Demarco himself. The sheer volume of printed material generated by Demarco alone has done much to perpetuate what amounts to a kind of self-mythologising of his role in the Scottish art world since the 1960s and the recent attempts to historicise Demarco's place in Scottish art history continue unabated, if overdue. Undoubtedly, Demarco was a central figure in reinvigorating contemporary art in Scotland and providing much-needed alternatives to the status quo. His publishing ventures represent an unusual (for the time) degree of interest in the design of the exhibition catalogue and many are notably ambitious in terms of the length and size of publication. Similarly, Demarco's enthusiasm for generating interest in his gallery through writing and publications was exemplified by his involvement in producing a gallery newsletter, now a staple of all contemporary art organisations. In short, Demarco's importance in the context of this

---

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, an excerpt from Oliver's 1964 *Guardian* review: 'The gallery [...] is shared by Richard Demarco, who is first of all a fine draughtsman, with an admirable ability to 'people' a white page with sharp, black lines. [...] Demarco [...] is adept at filling a space to perfection, whether with the spidery black lines with which he creates his little windows on the world of highly selective, stylised realism, or in the patterns of overlaid translucent washes of bright colours which he evolves from the impedimenta of small boats and fishing villages' in Oliver (1964) 'Edinburgh Exhibition', *The Guardian*, 8 September.

research was three-fold, noted in order of significance: firstly, Demarco's role was crucial to art writing simply in terms of his determination to exhibit art in Scotland which challenged the RSA hegemony and thereby allowed other writers, such as Oliver, the opportunity to develop and broaden the breadth and scope of their criticism. Secondly, Demarco's interest in recording and historicising all of his endeavours and activities resulted in the publication of catalogues that stand as rare and valuable records of exhibitions and events in Scotland. Thirdly, Demarco himself wrote regularly on the art he exhibited and on his philosophy of art. This last point is worth brief discussion, as the criticisms of Demarco's artistic persona could equally be applied to his writing. In other words, his buoyant enthusiasm and energy has often led to the publication of overheated (almost purple) prose that has sometimes undermined the seriousness of his intentions. In Francesca Kay's 2009 novel *An Equal Stillness* there is a passage which recounts a conversation between two artists describing the fictional art dealer Patrick Mann as 'one round bouncing ball full of superlatives [...] If you show him any paintings he'll explode' (Kay, 2009, p.66). Like the fictional Mann ('an up and coming dealer, a young man with a new gallery'), Demarco has been similarly described as prone to excessive use of superlatives. Under this seemingly boundless enthusiasm, it is clear from his activities that expertise and knowledge have often underpinned Demarco's approach to curating, but in terms of the writing itself Demarco's voice tends to be akin to the passionate 'fan' rather than the more measured discipline of the critic or historian. As Edward Gage noted in his history of Scottish Painting *The Eye in the Wind*:

Enthusiasm is his battery charger. Though always in danger of becoming debased through constant hyperbole – discrimination is not the better part of Demarco – his burning responses to whatever project or work of art currently obsesses him have been the principal factor behind his remarkable achievements (Gage, 1977, p.58).

Almost every written description of Demarco himself includes adjectives such as 'lively', 'energetic' 'indefatigable', 'enthusiastic'. All of these attributes could equally be applied to his writing – in its effervescent pace, style and tone it reads as an extension of Demarco's personality.

As a ubiquitous presence at art events and exhibitions in Edinburgh it is unsurprising that Demarco became a regular contributor to exhibition catalogues. Aside from the writing for the Demarco Gallery or Demarco-initiated exhibitions hosted off-site, Demarco also wrote short texts for artists exhibiting elsewhere. These texts were often brief introductions rather than critical essays and tended to focus on

Demarco's personal and professional connections with the exhibiting artist(s), often centring on exhibitions that had been held at the Demarco Gallery.<sup>40</sup>

It is as a publisher and commissioning editor, then, rather than as a critic, that Demarco is most relevant in the context of this research. From the beginning of Demarco's career as a facilitator of the arts with the Traverse Theatre Club and Traverse Theatre Art Gallery until the present day Demarco has produced a startling amount of literature – brochures, leaflets, magazines and catalogues – to accompany the exhibitions and events he has staged. In the mid-1960s, awareness of the role of publications as a way to both help establish and strengthen the reputation of galleries and artists was rarely acknowledged in Scotland. Demarco, however, had a gift for generating publicity which quickly manifested itself in countless public talks, speeches and lectures, television appearances, the courting of critics such as Cordelia Oliver and the almost relentless production of printed material which carried the name of his gallery. Demarco's ubiquitous presence as the self-appointed spokesperson for contemporary art in Scotland clearly irked many of the more established and reserved elements of the Scottish art world (a fact acknowledged often by Cordelia Oliver, as discussed). Nevertheless, in spite of the undoubted and substantial element of self-promotion and limelight-seeking (personal pronouns are a constant feature of his writing), it should be remembered that much of Demarco's critical and curatorial efforts were made on behalf of artists he admired (even if they were described as 'my' artists), and he was often eminently successful in attracting critical attention (along with Cordelia Oliver, the London-based critic Caroline Tisdall was a frequent supporter of Demarco's work in the 1970s, and regularly featured his projects in the pages of *The Guardian*). Demarco's proselytising style of speaking and writing, then, came out of the sincere pursuit of an almost utopian ideal of the role art could play in the cultural life of Scotland (even if that ideal featured Demarco firmly at the centre as a paternalistic, omniscient narrator). An article written for *Scottish International* in 1971 is a prime example of Demarco's approach and his writing style. The informal tone of the prose is heavily garnished with exclamation marks, rhetorical questions and manifesto-like statements, and focuses, as so often, on the issue of funding:

If I had the entire annual £9m grant allotted to the Arts Council of Great Britain I'd know it still wasn't enough if I were to solve the problems of the 200 or so artists who look to the Demarco

---

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the forewords in the catalogue *Alastair Michie*, Zaydler Gallery, London, 1969 and *Ian McCulloch*, Camden Arts Centre, London, 1986.



Gallery for patronage. And believe me, I do want to put the artist to good use all over this country. I don't want artists to content themselves speaking to artists or even art experts. [...] I am impatient. I want to shake off the unfortunate image that every gallery director or even Festival Director carries. I want to be taken as seriously, for my artists' sake, as all those men of influence who have a right to plan our destiny for at least this decade. [...] I've always wanted to live like a Renaissance Prince. Wouldn't we all? Of course, on one condition, that I could earn no right to the worldly power that I would represent. I think I'll ask my artists anyway to have a go at Edinburgh's shoreline and its glorious townscape because I truly wish them to endure and maybe without these artists and their poetic vision such aspects of our heritage cannot be protected. But how much money is there available to the world's artists for such a herculean task? – nowhere near as much as for the next Apollo moon shot (Demarco, 1971, p.11).

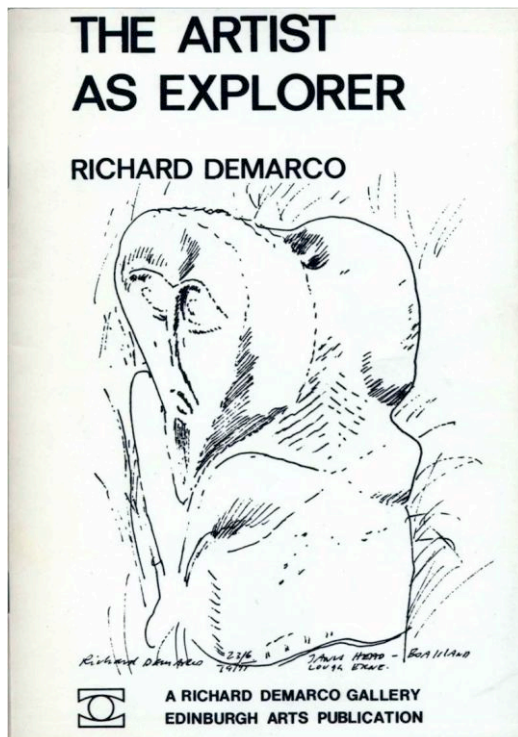


Fig.18 Cover of Richard Demarco's  
*The Artist as Explorer*, 1978.

Almost all of Demarco's own writings (and there are countless examples) follow in this vein, sitting somewhere between the journalistic 'puff piece', disjointed, diaristic musings and attempts to express an artistic philosophy or curatorial 'statement'. The lengthy, self-published 1978 text *The Artist as Explorer* is another key example of this approach. Over sixty-four pages, Demarco addresses a huge range of ideas and influences in an attempt to discuss (as the subtitle notes) 'the relationship of

Edinburgh Arts, a 7,500 mile journey into the origins of European culture, to the developing contemporary Art language of the twentieth century'. Demarco's overly ambitious attempts to address such monumental themes (such as 'Celtic Consciousness') demonstrate both his enthusiasm and passion, but also, in terms of the expression of these ideas in writing, his lack of structure and focus. Unlike Oliver's and Moffat's writing, Demarco's writing is notable for its lack of discipline and clarity in terms of a central argument. Stylistically, Demarco's writing is that of a 'stream-of-consciousness' series of ideas and rarely develops into a disciplined analysis or discussion. What it does share with Oliver's and Moffat's writing is the tendency to return to the same set of issues over and over again.

As records of Demarco's modus operandi, the texts are a valuable record of the multitude of activities and events initiated by him; as examples of critical writing (or writing on contemporary art more generally) they are less significant. For this reason, I shall concentrate on Demarco's role as a publisher and editor rather than analysing his own writings specifically. However, in spite of the weaknesses of the writing, the fact that, as an artist, Demarco was determined to express himself in print is significant in an era where so few artists considered writing as a part of their practice.



Fig.19 John Martin leaflet designs for The Traverse Festival Gallery, 1964.

In the early 1960s, with the Traverse Theatre Club, Demarco already had his sights on the potential of publications to accompany performances and exhibitions. He approached his friend and fellow Edinburgh College of Art graduate John Martin to design a logo for the Theatre Club. Following this,

Martin quickly became a member of the founding committee at the Traverse, responsible for designing programmes and catalogues. Martin continued to design for Demarco for over forty years (the most recent publications being devoted to anthologies and compilations of the older material, such as the 2009 book *The Demarco Collection and Archive: An Introduction*). In *The Richard Demarco Gallery Catalogue Designs 1966-1990*, published in 2000, Martin wrote: 'Our policy was to produce catalogues of an international standard for each exhibition. [...] Eventually the financial strain of publishing high quality catalogues at such frequent intervals (often monthly) became too much and cheaper formats had to be devised' (Martin, 2000, p.3). The frequency with which the gallery produced leaflets and catalogues, and the strong graphic identity developed by Martin (who cited Hans Schleger and Gordon House as typographical influences), quickly established a 'house style' for the catalogues. The importance of 'branding' in the commercial gallery sector today is clear. From the late 1960s a 'template' for each type of show was developed – for group shows the catalogue would be a standard cover with the gallery logo in gold on a background of red or black with text pages saddle-stitched in. For solo exhibitions a four- or six-page folder was used. In 1969, six solo shows were held adjacent to each other, for which Martin designed 'a wallet to contain six separate six page folder catalogues. [...] this idea was developed further in the form of several individual catalogue sheets printed in black only on both sides and inserted into a clear plastic envelope' (Martin, 2000, p. 11).

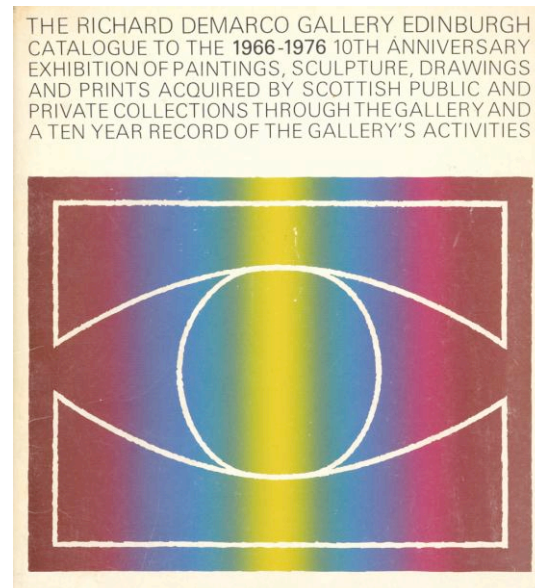
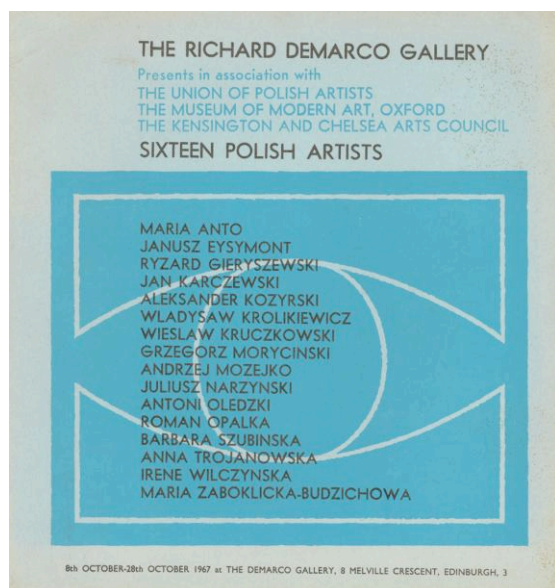


Fig. 20 Cover of *Sixteen Polish Artists* catalogue, 1967.

Fig.21 Cover of *The Richard Demarco Gallery 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* catalogue, 1976.

What is interesting about the catalogue designs is that as material objects they reflect the different phases and approaches in the history of the gallery, as Martin has described:

Up to this point [the late 1960s] the paintings and sculpture on show in the gallery were objects to be neatly displayed on the walls or floor [...] the design of our art catalogues therefore was required to be 'tasteful' and well-mannered in the style of the good London galleries. [...] Suddenly everything was changed by the arrival of Joseph Beuys and his fellow Düsseldorf artists [...] Each artist wanted to supply the material for his own page in the catalogue and it became obvious that a freedom of expression would be required which could not easily be tailored to a homogeneous typographical lay-out (Martin, 2000, p.14).

The Demarco Gallery committee clearly recognised the development of an identifiable 'house style' and logo as crucial elements of the public face of the organisation. They also, as the quote above demonstrates, recognised that the integrity of the catalogue design should reflect the integrity of the gallery. The design was progressive and ambitious, especially compared with the staid, monochrome offerings published by other Scottish galleries (on the rare occasions visual arts publications were produced). But apart from the crucial role Demarco played in generating writing through the exhibitions and events he co-ordinated (such as the broadsheet reviews discussed later), the very fact that the gallery was building up an archive and body of literature is significant in the way it established a precedent in visual art publishing (particularly on *contemporary* art). The existence of these publications led to an increased need and desire for writing on art as an essential element of the exhibition catalogue. The criticality (or lack thereof) of the texts in the early stages of Demarco's publishing ventures is less important here than the fact that texts were simply being written. Clearly, as a commercial venue in its early years, the critical component of any catalogue text could be seen as being compromised by the 'for-profit' nature of the institution. But from the late 1960s (around 1967) the Demarco Gallery became a non-profit company, partly public funded, and from this point the emphasis was on art education rather than art dealing. With this renewed sense of purpose and direction, the scope and length of the catalogue texts increased and Demarco began to commission high-profile critics and artists to contribute essays and articles to the catalogues as well as continuing to write extensively himself. Apart from the more substantial catalogues, the gallery published a range of newsletters, small magazines and broadsheet diaries 'to keep in touch with our supporters' (Martin, 2000, p.16). Predating Tom McGrath's *Nuspeak* newsletters for the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow in the mid-1970s, Demarco's

stapled NewsSheets, published from the late 1960s onwards, acted as a way of fostering a sense of community and ownership amongst the gallery's supporters. These modest newsletters were followed by the Poster/Diary and developed into larger monthly publications including *Umbrella* and *Parasol*.



Fig.22 *Umbrella*, July, 1972  
(A Demarco Gallery publication)

*Umbrella*, first published in early 1972, took the form of a substantial folded newsletter large enough to carry a calendar of cultural events in Scotland, articles, interviews, poems and news from the gallery. The design sometimes allowed the newsletter to fold out to form a poster, though often this space was taken up with additional texts. For the first few issues, *Umbrella* was edited not by Demarco himself but by Robert Shure, though unsurprisingly texts by Demarco dominated most issues. Like all Demarco's writing, much of the text was devoted to detailed diaristic accounts of the artists, actors, directors and writers he had recently met on his frequent travels, accompanied by his snapshots. The 'namedropped' figures were almost invariably associated in some way with the Demarco Gallery or the Edinburgh Arts summer schools.



Fig.23 *Umbrella*, April 1972 (A Demarco Gallery publication)

The second issue of *Umbrella* (inside the large cover photograph of Demarco and Joseph Beuys at Edinburgh College of Art) featured a profile of the Scottish filmmaker and poet Margaret Tait, written by Robert Shure. The article, essentially a biography interspersed with fragments of Tait's poetry, was significant in that it acted as a 'stand-alone' text, with no explicit connection to the Demarco Gallery (Shure, 1972a). Other early issues of *Umbrella* (Shure, 1972b; Shure 1972c; Shure 1972d) were similarly more diverse in their coverage of the arts than later, more overtly promotional editions. Again, like Tom McGrath's Third Eye Centre publication *NuSpeak*, early copies of *Umbrella* included poetry and texts by contributors alongside Demarco's reportage and the more pragmatic information on gallery news and events, demonstrating his commitment to 'the arts' in all their guises. The third issue resembled a Demarco-initiated version of Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine, featuring an extended interview with

Joseph Beuys, and a series of interviews with 'leading figures' in the Polish art world, including Tadeusz Kantor, the composer Boguslaw Schaffer and the artist Magdalena Abakanowicz. From this point, interviews and photographs became a regular element of the publication. In October 1972, with Demarco (with Sally Holman and Liz Carslake) as editor, *Umbrella* became *Parasol*, 'as a tribute to the Edinburgh Festival's Polish Exhibition, *Atelier '72*'. The publication (Demarco, 1972) was almost entirely composed of reproduced excerpts of broadsheet reviews of Demarco Gallery exhibitions (by critics including Paul Overy in *The Times*, Edward Gage in *The Scotsman* and Cordelia Oliver in *The Guardian*). Again, the volume of art criticism reproduced in just this one issue highlights Demarco's aptitude for courting critical attention and generating publicity.

In February 1973, *Scottish International* incorporated a ten-page issue of *Parasol* magazine (the 'Magazine of the Richard Demarco Gallery') into its pages (Demarco, 1973). By far the lengthiest text was taken up by Demarco's 'documentation', in both text and thumbnail photographs, of his travels in France, Holland, Austria and Yugoslavia, focusing as ever on the artists, curators and gallery directors he met. Again, with Demarco's writing, little time is spent on the specific discussion of individual art works – the focus is firmly on art world infrastructure and a general 'survey' of particular directions. The rest of the magazine contains 'news' about activities at the gallery, such as a reproduced *Scotsman* article on the blood donation initiative held at the gallery in 1972, a fundraising appeal on behalf of the gallery by Cordelia Oliver and a list of participants involved in Edinburgh Arts '73.

Since the demise of the gallery itself, Demarco has continued to write on contemporary visual art and to commission others to write for his ongoing series of publications, now often focusing on his archives. In the 1980s, along with Cordelia Oliver and many others, Demarco became a regular contributor to the independent Scottish art newspaper *ArtWork*, published by Aberdeen-based Famedram (produced and edited by Bill Williams who also published Cordelia Oliver's book *Magic in the Gorbals* on the Citizens' Theatre and Demarco's illustrated memoir *A Life in Pictures*). In a publication produced to celebrate twenty-five years of the magazine, Demarco noted:

[...] in my role as an art critic, I benefitted greatly through the years from *ArtWork*. I was commissioned to write essays on a wide variety of subjects [...] *ArtWork* has provided me with a viewpoint for my views as I had to consider historic moments which changed the face of the Scottish art world [...] In the eighties, I was contributing editor of *Studio International*, the

world's oldest journal of the visual arts. I regarded myself as fortunate to have two art world publications providing me with the opportunity to write about art (Demarco, 2008, pp. 42 - 44).

The Richard Demarco Archive held at Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh and the online digital archive (<http://www.demarco-archive.ac.uk/>), a partnership between the School of Fine Art at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design (University of Dundee), the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art and the Demarco European Art Foundation, hold examples of the numerous publications produced by Demarco. The dedication, often against financial constraints, to publish catalogues and record each event in a transportable, easily accessible form (and a form which would extend the 'shelf-life' of temporary exhibitions) demonstrates the forward-thinking, progressive and entrepreneurial vision of the gallery's committee in an era almost devoid of visual arts publications. At the same time, it underlines Demarco's determination to disseminate information on the artists he worked with 'by any means necessary' – his insistence on utilising any and every available avenue in the pursuit of his aims. Publishing, commissioning and writing was one of these 'avenues' and through this Demarco helped to establish a body of critical writing in Scotland by working closely with critics such as Cordelia Oliver. At the same time, the Demarco Gallery had played a pioneering role in the publication of substantial catalogues (including critical writing) on contemporary art. In doing so, he set a precedent for publishing in visual arts organisations and his example was followed by many other galleries, both in Scotland and abroad.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Passionate, partial and political: Alexander Moffat, Alan Bold and *Rocket*



Fig.24 Alan Bold (ed.) Cover of *Rocket*, No.8.

Fig.25 Alan Bold (ed.) Cover of *Rocket*, No.10

The following chapter considers the role of Alexander Moffat and his circle in more depth, beginning with a discussion of Moffat's fellow New Realist painter Robert Crozier and Moffat's friend and supporter, the poet Alan Bold.

As the last chapter suggested, the scarce criticism which existed on contemporary Scottish art in this period was not published primarily in newspapers or specialist art magazines, but more often through

small, sometimes self-published literary magazines. One of these was a tiny pamphlet called *Rocket* which was a combination of writing on art (art criticism and polemics) and poetry, with occasional reproduced images of contemporary art work.

*Rocket* first appeared in 1963/64 as a typewritten 'freesheet'-style publication. The size of each issue varied, from one sheet of typewritten, double-sided A5 in March 1964 (*Rocket* No.3) to a slightly more substantial colour leaflet by issue 8. Edited by the poet and literary critic Alan Bold, *Rocket's* appearance was that of a classic, self-published 'small magazine' of the type which circulated amongst the poetry community. Its emphasis, however, was regularly focused on visual art as much if not more than literature. Alexander Moffat has described *Rocket* as 'an attempt by Bold to encourage artists to write' (Moffat, 2009). The artist Robert Crozier was a regular contributor. Based in Dundee at the time of the publication of these articles, Crozier was a graduate of Edinburgh College of Art who also wrote poetry. Whilst working as an editor for Edinburgh University's literary magazine *Gambit*, Alan Bold had 'commissioned Mr Crozier to do several articles which would place the artistic establishment in its proper perspective' (Bold, 1964a, p.1). *Rocket* became the new outlet for these pieces.<sup>41</sup> According to Alexander Moffat, 'spurred on by Bold, Robert Crozier wrote a number of critical essays which had the Scottish art establishment shaking in their shoes' (Moffat, 2009). Following a brief introduction by Bold, *Rocket* No.2 consisted entirely of Crozier's article 'Drawing Room Painting in Edinburgh' which was intended to trace, '[...] the evolution of abstract art from its revolutionary inception up to its present commodity-status' (Bold, 1964a, p.1).

Crozier's article was nothing if not trenchant. The position laid out in 'Drawing Room Painting in Edinburgh' can best be seen in direct quotes taken from the piece:

In painting we were left with the drawing room vision of abstract art. It is a commodity, sold in London, Paris and New York through a highly organised system of art dealers. It is a luxury commodity sold at prices impossible for the majority, but representing a mere whim to those who buy it. Even those who laud its achievement like Kenneth Clark and Herbert Read admit that it is monotonous, prone to charlatanism and can be produced by apes. Like any other

---

<sup>41</sup> Bold claims in the same issue that 'the right-wingers had me "removed" from *Gambit*'. (Bold, 1964a, p.1). His 'removal' was presumably a factor in Bold's decision to launch *Rocket*. Published and edited by Bold himself, the pamphlet presented him with the opportunity to commission, edit and publish without compromise.

commodity it requires built in obsolescence and the dealers lavishly present an unlimited number of young geniuses who *Rocket* to a short lived stardom like pop singers. It is bought by the established upper class because of a curious idea that it shows access to intellectual arcana, or capriciously as furnishings. For the social climber it is an effective way of demonstrating that he has 'arrived.

Edinburgh is not one of the large art markets and I have heard relief expressed, that Scottish Art is not subject to the same vicissitudes, common in the metropoli. This is not a redeeming factor however, for paintings are sold to the same class for similar reasons. Painting neither reinforces progressive ideas nor contributes in anyway [sic] to a fuller life for the people of Scotland. Art here is equally centralised because it is not part of a common culture but represents the caprices of a few. The difference in the structure of the Edinburgh art market only serve [sic] to illustrate how well it caters for its parochial bourgeoisie who, sometime enviously and sometimes self-righteously stand outside La Dolce Vita (Crozier, 1964a, p.2).

Crozier goes on to lambast the Royal Scottish Academy ('the Scottish equivalent of Bond St.') for pandering to the taste of the upper middle classes through the development of a diluted form of abstraction, semi-abstract paintings of 'vases of flowers, boats etc.,'. He continues by observing the structures governing how paintings are priced in the RSW exhibition, claiming that despite the 'similarity among the majority of the 376 exhibits, we find the prices are supported by social position' and that 'the successful Scottish painters accept painting completely as a commodity'.

March, 1964

This issue of ROCKET presents the complete text of a lecture given by Mr. Robert Crozier to the Edinburgh College of Art Sketch Club, on Monday 23rd March, 1964. Mr. Crozier's lecture was intended for the students who invited him to speak, but, unfortunately, it was the Art College Staff contingent who did most of the heckling when a question time was declared. I say unfortunately, because those members of staff who chose to disagree with Mr. Crozier trotted out the most predictable platitudes with an odious aura of condescension. They did not tackle Mr. Crozier on the many points raised by his lecture; instead they made lengthy speeches from the floor which attempted to justify: careerism, their own escapism, the Art College System, and - consequently - the competitive society. As for the students who disagreed with Mr. Crozier: the only indication of their existence was in their blind, almost hysterical, applause for their teachers whose pretence to wisdom they seem to accept completely. Mr. Crozier's plea for more public discussion can not be ignored by Art Students if they want to remove the present set-up which results in such manifestations as the cult of the benevolent despotism of the staff. The students are too obsequious. Instead of smugly assuming that the artistic status quo is desirable let the students compare the work of their teachers with that of Mr. Crozier and then ask whether Crozier is an esprit follet or someone talking sense. The most obvious difference between Mr. Crozier and his detractors is contained in Hugh MacDiarmid's observation that:

"In short, any utterance that is not pure  
Propaganda is impure propaganda for sure".

ALAN BOLD.

Painting in the Scientific Age.

I probably let myself in for a good deal of criticism giving a talk like this, because I come absolutely without credentials, and you will set off from the start to judge rather than accept what I say.

This/

Fig.26 Alan Bold (ed.) *Rocket*, No.4, 1964.

The first few issues of *Rocket* seemed to alternate between writing by Alan Bold and Robert Crozier. Numbers 3 and 4 both appeared in March 1964. Number 3 was an article on the work of Crozier by Bold (Bold, 1964b), number 4 the transcript of a lecture - 'Painting in the Scientific Age' - given by Crozier to the Edinburgh College of Art Sketch Club on 23 March 1964 (Crozier, 1964b). Like his writing on John Bellany and Alexander Moffat (considered further in this chapter), Bold's support of Crozier was

politically motivated and just as Crozier's piece in the previous issue had pinpointed abstraction as representative of what was 'wrong' with Scottish painting, Bold's subsequent commentary of Crozier's work in issue 3 again returned to this theme. Contemporary abstraction was seen by both Bold and Crozier as an art which 'eschewed responsibility to society', that was uncommitted and served no social purpose. In many of their articles Crozier and Bold consistently laid the blame for what they saw as an impotent Scottish 'house style' in painting firmly at the door of the art schools and the RSA. Issue No.3 was no exception. Presented ostensibly as a consideration of Crozier's visual art, Bold's essay continued the tirade against abstraction, calling for a return to 'humanist' representation. As well as highlighting the common sympathies found in both Crozier's painting and writing, Bold also addressed Crozier's criticism:

The authors who influenced Crozier were many and diverse but they all confirmed for him the validity of Marxism and of a Marxist approach to art. His own art criticism is influenced by Arnold Hauser, John Berger and Ernst Fischer (Bold, 1964b, p2).

Hauser, Berger and Fischer (along with Ernst Gombrich) are cited and referenced several times throughout various issues of *Rocket*, providing a kind of contextual critical framework for discussions by Bold and Crozier.<sup>42</sup> While the viewpoints put forward by the two critics are unambiguous in terms of their Marxist allegiances, the specific reference to Hauser, Berger and Fischer abundantly emphasises these sympathies.

Before Crozier's lecture transcript was published in the same month in *Rocket* no.4, Bold reviewed the occasion itself at the end of his text on Crozier in *Rocket* no.3. In it, he noted that:

Most people attending Crozier's lecture [...] are more familiar with his criticism than with his painting. This is not because of his reluctance to exhibit his work but because of his refusal to acquiesce in an artistic climate which offers security and fame to the careerist who scorns any humanist content in his work, but ignores the painter who prizes his own integrity and whose work stabs the conscience of the bourgeoisie [...] Let it be said that Crozier is not working in isolation (Bold, 1964b, p.2).

---

<sup>42</sup> A quote from Berger's *Permanent Red* opened Bold's 1963 leaflet 'Introduction to the Paintings of Alexander Moffat and John Bellany' (Bold, 1963).

Crozier's lecture (Crozier, 1964b) itself encouraged dissent amongst the students, and urged them to question the education they received at ECA. Again, abstract art was held up as an example of anti-intellectualism, 'monotony and preciousness'. Crozier attempted to validate and contextualise his position with reference to the historical emergence of abstraction as initially pioneering and revolutionary before adding pointedly that in spite of these revolutionary beginnings, 'after fifty years of this sort of thing, it is completely impotent'. The lecture, although purporting to encourage dialogue and debate, reads in transcript more as a paternalistic 'cautionary tale'. Students were essentially warned against the dangers of complacency, commerce and conservatism. Even more provocatively, Crozier advised students against the folly of showing blind obedience to the instruction of their tutors. The lecture's denouement seems to have been designed to galvanise the students in the audience whilst simultaneously alienating their tutors: 'You can be optimistic on one account: all your teachers have failed to produce an art with any relevance to the twentieth century. You may fail, but you haven't failed yet' (Crozier, 1964b, p.7).

If Bold's account of the lecture in the introduction to the *Rocket* transcript is to be believed, Crozier's plea to the politically active students of the mid-'60s (contemporary political movements with active student participants – CND, for example – were discussed in the lecture) was misjudged. The 'divide and conquer' approach attempted by Crozier in the delivery of the lecture resulted not in an uprising or sit-in (à la Hornsey), but in the students' 'obsequious' support of their insulted tutors.

Crozier's writing is unusual for this period in Scotland. As I have suggested, the majority of even genuinely critical writing seemed to allow the criticality to emerge from description or direct observation – the critical edge of a review was often implied rather than stated. Where a critic explicitly stated his or her value judgement (such as in many of Cordelia Oliver's reviews), the criticism tended to focus on the quality or value of the work in relation to other works in a group exhibition, or focused specifically on formal elements (the handling of paint, the mastery of line, the use of colour). Crozier and Bold frequently made particular reference to broader cultural movements, wider developments in politics and philosophy and aimed to contextualise their judgement or position with reference to historical precedent. As well as their discussion of artists, Bold and Crozier made reference to art historians, theorists, writers and other cultural figures in their writing. In the lecture transcript, for example, Clive Bell, André Malraux, André Breton, Henry Miller, Ernst Fischer, Pablo Picasso and Alexander Trocchi are all name-checked in the course of Crozier's argument. One of the other names

mentioned specifically was that of Robin Philipson – this would not be the only time Philipson was singled out for criticism in the pages of *Rocket*.

The first *Rocket Booster*, entitled ‘Home-Made Pop’, was an essay on Pop Art in Scotland, with Robin Philipson used as a central case study for the claim that Scottish artists were pursuing a ‘flirtation with Pop Art’ (Crozier, 1964c). At the time of its publication, Philipson was Head of the Drawing and Painting Department at Edinburgh College of Art. After studying at Edinburgh College of Art between 1936 and 1940 he returned to teach there from 1947 until his retirement in 1982. The 1950s and ’60s saw Philipson at the height of his career. Having been associated with the group known as the Edinburgh School, Philipson moved increasingly towards a kind of semi-abstraction in the late 1950s.<sup>43</sup> It seems highly probable that Crozier’s and Bold’s earlier accusations of Scottish painters who pursued diluted, bourgeois forms of abstraction (still lifes, domestic interiors) were levelled at Philipson in particular. Philipson’s association with both the Art College and the RSA undoubtedly reinforced, for Crozier and Bold at least, his position as a key example of the *laissez-faire* conservatism they railed against. When Philipson further demonstrated his lack of integrity (in the eyes of Crozier and Bold) through his appropriation of certain elements of Pop Art, the critical knives were drawn. In the introduction to ‘Home-Made Pop’, however, the reader is lulled into a false sense of security (if the reader were a supporter of Philipson) through Crozier’s assertion that he does not:

[...] consider the work of Mr. Robin Philipson in any way inferior to that of many internationally famous abstract artists. Indeed he can be more interesting than many of them: while artists like Rothko, Soulage, Kline and others seem to be visual illiterates who do little more than make a personal mark, he commands a variety of effects without too obvious eclecticism – or did until recently (Crozier, 1964c, p.2).

The conclusion to this opening paragraph, however, sets the scene for the rest of the text in which Philipson is accused of showing ‘the sort of deference to the Bond Street Joneses which has been the awkward companion of Scottish artistic Chauvinism for some time’. Crozier’s criticism of Philipson could be seen as being a critique of Pop Art generally but the emphasis is focused more on the lack of Scottish

---

<sup>43</sup> William Gillies, another artist associated with the Edinburgh School, was Principal of Edinburgh College of Art in 1964 and was similarly criticised in *Rocket* No.2 due to the correlation Crozier saw between establishment status and the price of paintings in the RSW exhibition.

artists to forge their own path, uninfluenced by the vagaries of the fashionable art world in 'London and America'. The argument is an extension of that started in *Rocket No.2*, which also discussed the infrastructure of Scottish art and its relationship to the so-called 'centres' of the art world. 'Home-Made Pop', however, is much more specific in its discussion of particular works. Unlike some of Crozier's earlier criticisms, the art works themselves are used here as Crozier's substantiating evidence. ('Home-Made Pop' shares many of the same ideas and points raised by Alan Bold in an essay on John Bellany and Alexander Moffat, written in 1965, in which Andy Warhol is described as the apotheosis of anti-intellectualism in art.)

Crozier's tone, both here and elsewhere, can be sarcastic and derisive. His antagonistic analogies seem intended to provoke but are perhaps rendered slightly less caustic through the deadpan manner of their delivery. At times, the guilty pleasure of reading Crozier's texts is in their waspish humour and the shock value of the iconoclasts' doctrine. If Crozier was successful in his attempted debunking of establishment figures and mores, his mode of delivery was characterised by an attitude which owes more to the stereotypical smug, well-read sixth former (bearing in mind that Crozier was only 24 when these essays were published) than that of a heavyweight critical contender, a respected critic 'recognised' by the establishment. That is not to undermine Crozier's critical position. Indeed, the polemical Young Turk persona projected through his writing represents an original and energetic voice in an otherwise staid critical climate.

Arguably, the youthful confidence and self-assuredness of Crozier's writing owe more to the counter-cultural literature of the mid-'60s than the established critical or journalistic modes of art writing. Even at its most questioning and critical, Scottish art criticism in the 1960s tended to be deferential and relatively respectful in discussions of established Scottish artists.<sup>44</sup> The irreverence of Crozier's writing in this context is unusual. In particular, the explicit emphasis on a specific political/theoretical position was not shared by mainstream critics of the period, who remained focused on formalist interpretations of specific works rather than broader discussions of the infrastructure of the art world. In a Scottish context Crozier's writing can be seen to have prefigured developments which would become standard practices in much art criticism of the late 1970s and '80s – the adoption of a socio-political 'lens' or

---

<sup>44</sup> Cordelia Oliver's criticism at its most questioning, for example, usually maintained a respectful tone in discussion of specific works by the 'elder statesmen' of Scottish art, even if her review of the exhibition as a whole was negative. Her reviews of Robin Philipson's work are a good example of this (see note 23).



agenda; the focus on context; the oppositional tone. Some of Crozier's early observations on Scottish art were reiterated by successive writers and art historians. In particular, Crozier's discontent with the history of early to mid-twentieth-century Scottish art – for its parochialism, deference to outside influences and lack of confidence – has been echoed several times in later accounts (such as Bill Hare's *Contemporary Painting in Scotland* and Edward Gage's *The Eye in the Wind*). His views were also shared by contemporary artist-writers such as Cordelia Oliver, Richard Demarco and Alexander Moffat.

While issues 5 and 6 of *Rocket* (published in June 1964) devoted themselves exclusively to literary concerns (extracts of two long satirical poems by Bold and Crozier in issue 5; the opening section of Bold's poem *The Triumph of Life* in issue 6), the publication returned to a concentration on visual art in *Rocket* No.7 (August 1964) which was devoted in its entirety to a discussion of the work of Alexander Moffat and John Bellany. The essay, 'The Other Side of Scottish Art' followed earlier texts by Bold on Moffat and Bellany's paintings.



Fig.27 John Bellany and Alexander Moffat at the railings outside the RSA, 1964 [Photograph].

A year earlier, in the summer of 1963, Bellany and Moffat, then recent graduates of Edinburgh College of Art, were hanging an open-air protest exhibition. According to Andrew Gibbon Williams and Andrew Brown in their history of Scottish art, *The Bigger Picture*, Moffat and Bellany 'had been viewed as troublemakers ever since arriving at Edinburgh Art College', angering the college authorities 'by turning their backs on the academic disciplines of life-drawing, anatomy, still-life and composition [...] painting abstracts in the manner of Alan Davie. From this [...] they had progressed to a political awareness which they expressed in a Socialist Realist style [...] The exhibition on the railings outside the Royal Scottish Academy was meant to cock a snook both at the academy's stuffy annual summer show and at the then unchallenged orthodoxy of international abstraction' (Brown and Gibbon Williams, 1993, p. 205).

The three exhibitions were staged in the mould of the Salon de Refusés. Modelled specifically on Gustave Courbet's 1855 Pavilion of Realism, Moffat has acknowledged that Courbet's challenge to and questioning of cultural authority were the direct inspiration for the decision by Bellany and himself to exhibit their paintings, very visibly, outside the RSA (on the Castle Terrace railings in 1963 and *The Mound* in 1964 and '65). Like Courbet's work, these paintings were executed on a monumental scale – sixteen by seven feet paintings. In site, subject matter and scale, the paintings were intended as manifestoes.<sup>45</sup> The goal was two-fold: to present an alternative to the 'house style' of the Royal Scottish Academy (just as Courbet had opposed the academic teaching of the *École des Beaux-Arts*) and to stress the importance of a return to figuration and pictorial narrative as a central position in Scottish art (which, as Crozier and Bold stressed in *Rocket*, was swamped with semi-abstract landscapes and still lifes) whilst avoiding the sentiment or anecdote of genre painting. In the context of this research, it is perhaps not coincidental that Moffat cites Courbet as a particular influence – in both cases the artists chose to voice their discontent in canvas and in print.<sup>46</sup> Moffat's statements about his work and much of Bold's writing on realism in Scottish art read almost as latter-day versions of Courbet's own Realist Manifesto. Similarly, just as Courbet's text appeared in the catalogue accompanying his 1855 exhibition, Moffat's and Bellany's exhibitions were supported by leaflets containing essays by Alan Bold which were handed out to passers-by. As Brown and Gibbon Williams have written, 'Looking at the works that caused the uproar now, they seem tame; but the stark realism of Bellany's fisherfolk and Moffat's workers was nothing less than an assault on the art world status quo' (Brown & Gibbon Williams, 1993, p.205).

For the first exhibition in 1963, Bold wrote a text entitled 'Introduction to the Paintings of Alexander Moffat and John Bellany' (Bold, 1963a). Like the first few issues of *Rocket*, the format of the leaflets seemed to echo their radical content. The typewritten, stapled sheets of plain paper were in keeping with the pamphleteering manner of their distribution. As Moffat recalls: 'The Festival exhibitions we put together outside the RSA was really how *Rocket* began, as a catalogue introduction from Bold, which

---

<sup>45</sup> I am referring here to Courbet's monumental Realist paintings, particularly figurative works such as *After Dinner in Ornans* (1848/49), *The Artist's Studio. A Real Allegory* (1855), *The Stone Breakers* (1850) and *A Burial at Ornans* (1849/50).

<sup>46</sup> Perhaps ironically, Moffat later became an elected member of the RSA and has recently served as the Chair of the RSA Exhibitions Committee.

served as our primitive manifesto' (Moffat, 2009). Like much of his writing on visual art in the period, Bold's tone was proselytistic, and the carefully selected examples which he employed to support his position do much to add to the sense that the essay was less an interpretation of Bellany and Moffat's work, and more an attempt to shake the bourgeois Edinburgh art scene out of its perceived indifference and complacency towards social purpose in art. Each of Bold's essays, and some of Crozier's, rely on the same arguments, often the same examples and analogies, as though they had strategically decided to use repetition for emphasis. The essay written to accompany the 1963 open-air show is an edited version of Bold's essay 'A Kind of Realism', published in the Autumn 1963 issue of the Edinburgh University Review, *Gambit* – whole passages are repeated word for word (Bold, 1963b).

While Bold was the literary editor of *Gambit* the illustrated feature concentrated on the work of four painters who would later form the 'New Realist' group – John Binning, Robert Crozier, Alexander Moffat and John Bellany. In the essay, Bold claims that:

[...] these four have stylistic affinities which constitute a collective rejection not only of the parochial [...] but also of the decadent state of international art produced by the dealer system in London, Paris and New York.

John Binning, Robert Crozier, John Bellany and Alexander Moffat, the four painters we feature, differ very much from the present so-called 'Scottish School.' They have realised that there is more to painting than the invention of a personal technique, and they have emphasised the importance of content, which alone can demand a change of form (Bold, 1963b, p.18).

Bold goes on to define the four as being representative of a contemporary Scottish manifestation of Realism. In his discussion of each artist in turn, Bold persistently offers a comparative analysis of the work in relation to the dominant approaches he identifies in Scottish art. While there is little doubt that the status quo in Scottish art was as Bold describes, he nevertheless discusses 'most contemporary Scottish artists' as a homogenous group, implying that Binning, Crozier, Bellany and Moffat alone are the only alternative to the conservatism of the Academy. Bold's sweeping judgements in these polemical pieces consign all contemporary Scottish art other than that he identifies as contemporary Realism to the status of reactionary, decorative art. The heavy-handed implication that with the exception of these four young painters, all other contemporary Scottish artists were lacking in integrity highlights Bold's

rather bombastic, rhetorical strategies in (over)stating his case.<sup>47</sup> For example, while Crozier's primary concern is with the content of his painting, we are told that:

In this he differs from most contemporary Scottish artists, who believe this aspect of painting subordinate to paint handling and colour. For them execution is all-important. Subject matter is usually either extremely esoteric or irrelevant, and merely a vehicle for exhibiting their virtuosity as paint gymnasts (Bold, 1963b, p.19).

As well as their excessive concern with form and material, Bold also criticises those artists who deal with realist subject matter, and who 'usually do so under the present prevailing romantic influence, and we are familiar with the cloying sentimentality of their street children and tenements'. It seems clear that Joan Eardley is the artist Bold is referring to here – her images of children in Townhead, Glasgow were painted in the decade leading up to her death in 1963.

Other than the discussion of Crozier, each reproduced image in the *Gambit* feature was accompanied by a short statement by the artists themselves. Bold asserts that 'It is true that art flourishes best in movements', and the essay, as much as a discussion of the state of contemporary art, seems intended to identify and promote these artists as a collective, emerging movement. In *Rocket* No. 3, Bold had noted that Robert Crozier was 'not working in isolation' in pursuing a particular vision for Scottish art:

His aims are shared by Messrs. John Bellany, Alexander Moffat and John Binning who together with Crozier constitute and [sic] important group of painters. (Bold, 1964b, p.2)

Bold produced another 'hand-out' essay to accompany Bellany and Moffat's open-air exhibition on The Mound in 1965. The essay begins by attacking the prevalence of 'anti-intellectualism' in art, represented most significantly for Bold by Pop Art, and by attacking the 'principal apologists' for movements such as Tachisme, Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. Whilst Bold's sometimes assumptive and damning indictment of particular movements might seem over-simplified or overly dogmatic in retrospect, he nevertheless carefully demonstrated his understanding of the manner in which art history is

---

<sup>47</sup> In terms of its intended effect or assumed audience the level of Bold's bombast was perhaps misplaced, though in general his views on the 'state of Scottish art' were shared by figures such as Hugh MacDiarmid, Richard Demarco and Cordelia Oliver. If Bold's intention in these texts was to encourage a written dialogue his attempts were largely fruitless at the time of writing but his attempts to shake the apathy, stasis and complacency he identified in Scottish art were successful in terms of the production of new art (by artists such as Bellany and Moffat) if not in the written discourse surrounding these works. In terms of writing itself, Bold's rhetoric was echoed in the later writings of artists such as Alexander Moffat.

constructed. Before the discussion of Bellany's and Moffat's work in the essay, Bold tracks the development of Formalist criticism and art history in the work of Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Herbert Read. He goes on to cite Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* as a counterpoint to these formalist approaches, in line with Bold's own humanist view of art.

Bold saw Moffat and Bellany as the great hope of visual art as part of the second wave of the Scots Renaissance. In his insistence on defining the work as Realist, and in discussing the works of several Scottish painters as a cohesive whole, Bold can be seen as a precursor to Moffat himself in terms of his strategic championing of a group of young artists who reflected his own views on what contemporary art should be. Just as Moffat would bring together a group of his students in the early 1980s under the banner of New Image Painting, Bold, through the New Realist painters, encouraged a similar sense of an emergent 'movement' or shift for Scottish painting. Clearly, the championing of Moffat, Bellany, Crozier and their contemporaries as representative of a New Realism in Scottish painting took place in print before such associations were exhibited in the gallery space. The influence of these declarations undoubtedly affected the way in which these artists were publicly received and perceived and the way in which they would go on to be exhibited. As such, Bold's texts were initially successful in terms of how the artists were critically understood at the time and, perhaps more significantly, how they have been historicised and recorded since. Whilst themed exhibitions often play a major role in the actual or potential 'construction' of a group of artists, in the case of New Realism (and its successor New Image) the grouping of artists and the suggestion of political or ideological affinities between them were initially framed through writing.

In 1971 Bold proposed and selected what became a major touring exhibition, facilitated by the Scottish Arts Council. Entitled *Scottish Realism*, Bold returned to his interest in the painters discussed in *Gambit* and *Rocket* in the early 1960s, bringing together works by Moffat, Bellany, Robert Crozier, William Gillon and Ian McLeod, described as presenting 'a reasonably united front'. The catalogue was substantial and, along with interviews with each of the exhibiting artists, included a lengthy introductory essay by Bold which again cited Courbet and Léger as important historical figures. Notably, though, the essay attempted to historicise (if not mythologise) the open-air exhibitions of 1963, '64 and '65, specifically

mentioning *Rocket's* role in identifying and articulating the aims of new realist painting in Scotland (Bold, 1971, p.4).<sup>48</sup>

In an introduction to the essay *Aesthetics in Scotland*, a polemical, cultural call to arms by the Communist Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid written in 1950 but unpublished until 1984, Bold wrote that MacDiarmid's intention was to generate a movement which would result in political independence and consequently 'aesthetic dignity' for Scotland. MacDiarmid's writings were hugely influential on the way artists such as Bellany and Moffat began to see themselves and what they did in a wider context. Political (and therefore cultural) autonomy was achievable, in MacDiarmid's view, only through individuality and non-conformity. In Bold's words it was:

[...] salutary to see how this impulse towards individuality has been taken up by post-MacDiarmidian Scottish artists in every field. The young figurative painters of Scotland such as John Bellany and Alexander Moffat have used an expressive pictorial language that speaks for Scotland in an eloquent way and in doing so have allied a particular national outlook with a general continental consciousness (Bold, 1984, p.14).

In 1965 MacDiarmid added a paragraph to the original 1950 text, writing that 'the propaganda for realism of Alan Bold and his artist friends in *Rocket*' constituted 'signs of a genuine advance' against the 'recrudescence of philistinism that has characterised public discussion of the Edinburgh Festival programmes [...] almost always opposed in the crudest way to new and experimental work'. In a footnote to the text, Bold added that MacDiarmid had been an occasional contributor to *Rocket*, 'who was in sympathy with the editorial line which promoted the figurative art (of, for example, John Bellany) as the most appropriate pictorial idiom for Scotland' (Bold, 1984, p.96).

Following MacDiarmid, it was felt by Bold, Moffat and Crozier that the stagnation of Scottish art was down to a desire to preserve the status quo in tandem with the severe lack of serious critical and intellectual engagement on the subject of contemporary practice. For an ambitious young artist such as

---

<sup>48</sup> Bold would continue to support Moffat, Bellany and Gillon, particularly through exhibitions and supporting catalogue essays. See, for example, the small publication and text on Moffat for the 1975 solo exhibition in Warsaw (Alan Bold, *Alexander Moffat*, Sala Miedzynarodowego Klubu Prasy I Ksiazki, Warsaw, 1975) and the lengthy text written to accompany the Bold-organised exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery, also in 1975 (Alan Bold, *John Bellany, Neil Dallas Brown, Bill Gillon, Alexander Moffat*, *Rocket Enterprises*, Edinburgh, 1975).

Moffat, the experience of observing at first hand the so-called renaissance of Scottish culture in the arts and the attempt by figures such as Bold to include Moffat and Bellany in this vision served only to increase his frustration that the visual arts remained so staunchly unchallenged and unwilling to reassess its current condition in the context of broader developments outside Scotland (and in relation to the development of sophisticated criticism within Scottish literature). The following section considers Moffat's role in attempting to redress this imbalance, not only through his visual art, but through his involvement in curatorial projects and critical writing.

## **Alexander Moffat**

In the 1980s, through his role as a tutor at Glasgow School of Art, Alexander Moffat would go on to encourage and foster critical writing amongst his students, particularly Ken Currie and Malcolm Dickson. Moffat's own mentors and role models in the 1960s were often poets, critics and journalists as well as visual artists and his decision to begin to write about his own art work, and the work of others, was largely due to the encouragement of Alan Bold. *Rocket* in particular cemented Moffat's interest in the possibilities offered by writing to shape the reputation of visual art in Scotland. Moffat's association with key literary figures in 1960s Edinburgh, facilitated by his friendship with Bold, also proved to be an important catalyst for his enduring belief that the arts in Scotland need not be separated into mutually exclusive spheres – that a sense of cultural unity and shared purpose could create the critical mass needed to reinvigorate the visual arts in Scotland.

As well as being a staunch supporter and champion of his painting, Bold acted as a mentor for Moffat's initial forays into art writing, citing art historical instances of artist-writers as exemplars. As Moffat has noted:

He [Bold] was certainly of the opinion that painters should write about their work, their ideas, what other artists had done or were doing, their manifestos, etc. He would point out that Picasso had written this, Léger that, refer us to Delacroix's journals and Van Gogh's letters, and from a Scottish perspective cite J. D. Fergusson and William McCance's criticism and their links to Hugh MacDiarmid (Moffat, 2009).

Just as the concurrent interest in theatre and performance is manifested clearly in Cordelia Oliver's writing and Richard Demarco's facilitation of the arts, Moffat's recurrent interest in visual narratives,

and in literary figures as subjects in his portraiture, exemplify his interest in the relationships between literature and painting. Whilst the open-air exhibitions held by Bellany and Moffat between 1963 and 1965 highlighted the sense of a growing opposition to the Edinburgh School of genteel painting (or ‘drawing room sophistication’, as William Hardie has described it) they also represented the rapid rise of what are now referred to as ‘artist-run initiatives’ in Scotland.<sup>49</sup> As this research will demonstrate, these examples of self-determination were not limited to the establishment of gallery spaces. The term ‘artist-run initiative’ is often used rather reductively to refer to artist-run spaces in particular, but the growth of artist-led initiatives in this period included the publication of ‘DIY’ criticism and writing on art, exemplified by publications such as *Rocket*. Much of this kind of writing appeared in publications which shared both an aesthetic and an approach with the proliferation of low-fi, counter-cultural literature of the 1960s.

Scottish writers played a significant role in the development of such publishing ventures, from Alexander Trocchi’s *Sigma Portfolios* to Tom McGrath and Jim Haynes’ editorial involvement in the *International Times*. But in terms of visual art specifically, the activities of Richard Demarco, Cordelia Oliver and Alexander Moffat are significant in tracing the development of writing and publishing on visual art in Scotland in the latter decades of the twentieth century. As artists, curators and writers they strategically employed the opportunities afforded them by these multiple roles to revitalise the visual arts in Scotland. For all of these figures, their close association with one another and with specific galleries – the New 57 Gallery, the Demarco Gallery and the Third Eye Centre – allowed them to develop their writing through exhibition catalogues and related gallery publications.

Many of Moffat’s views on writing were informed by his student experience at Edinburgh College of Art, where, in the 1960s, the notion of artists writing about their work was actively discouraged. In some respects, like Robert Crozier, many of Moffat’s early texts represented an oppositional stance to an art school system which denigrated the practice of writing purely by virtue of their existence.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> I am not suggesting that artist-run spaces, organisations and initiatives in Scotland only began to appear in the 1960s – there are numerous examples of self-initiated associations and clubs which were established throughout the early twentieth century. In the 1940s, for example, The Refugee Centre and Unity Theatre in Glasgow became important meeting places for artists. Numerous groups and societies (such as ABBO, the Glasgow Group and WASPS) were founded in the 1950s and ’60s to support artists, provide studio and workshop provision and organise exhibitions.

<sup>50</sup> Following the first Coldstream Report in 1960, the National Advisory Council on Art Education outlined the requirements for a new Diploma in Art and Design (DipAD). A highly contentious element of the report was the recommendation to introduce art



It should be remembered that in those days (the early 1960s) there was no requirement to write anything at all as art students ... I think we had to tick boxes during slide tests, but no serious essays were expected as part of the course. When I won an Easter Scholarship in 1963 and set off for Paris with John Bellany, we handed in long essays about what we had seen – much to the embarrassment of several members of staff – they had never been asked to read what a student had written before. Alan Bold went over these things with me, correcting this and that and giving me valuable lessons in constructing arguments, editing out superfluous and repetitious passages ... he eventually presented me with his old typewriter as if to say you are a writer now, you'll need one of those (Moffat, 2009).

Clearly, Moffat valued the informal supervision and support of Bold in the development of his extra-curricular writing practice and felt frustrated by the attitude of his art school tutors towards writing. The requirement to write as part of an art school education became a hugely controversial and hotly contested issue in the 1970s with the introduction of an assessed written component of a BA Degree in Fine Art.<sup>51</sup>

Initially, then, the practice of writing was a private, critically reflective tool for Moffat as an artist. It offered another way of understanding and analysing an emerging visual art practice and it was this aspect which attracted Moffat to writing as a student, rather than the potential writing offered as a way to make a public statement or argue a particular idea. As he has acknowledged, the romantic associations of art and writing also held an appeal for Moffat:

I had some literary friends, some writer friends and I suppose I was influenced by them and had the idea of keeping a journal in the manner of Delacroix [...] it was a romantic thing that a young

---

and design history to art schools. The three Coldstream Reports (1960, 1962 and 1964) brought about changes which laid the foundations for art and design education in its current form. Scottish art schools expressed anxiety about whether or not they should adopt the new DipAD and then the Council for Academic Awards Degree System, which operated in English art schools. They eventually implemented the CNA degree system in the mid-1970s to avoid being swallowed up by larger polytechnic groups, as had happened in England and Wales.

<sup>51</sup> Whether coincidental or not, the volume of artists who began to pursue simultaneous or alternative careers in writing – both critical and creative – undoubtedly increased exponentially with the introduction of the written element. The controversy about these reforms (apart from the cultural shift needed to accept the compulsory addition of a text-based assessment) surrounded the fact that it was perceived to be the written element which had 'elevated' the art school diploma to the status of a university degree. In addition, the notion of 'grading' art work according to the university degree system proved unpalatable for many artists who had come through the diploma system, not least figures such as Cordelia Oliver, who frequently decried the new system as privileging students who were academically gifted over those who were 'truly creative' (see Oliver, 2000, p.155).

writer should do, so I started off tentatively writing a few things which weren't meant for publication (Moffat, 2002).

The notion of being part of a broader creative culture and community in Scotland was a powerful 'pull' for young art school students and graduates such as those in Bold's circle, and Moffat's affinity with the ideas and attitudes he encountered in Edinburgh's literary scene, served as an antidote to the stifling, rigidly medium-specific approach to art he had experienced at Edinburgh College of Art:

Being in close proximity to the literary scene in Edinburgh, hanging out in Milne's Bar and the Café Royal, sitting at the next table to Norman MacCaig, George MacKay Brown, Sydney Goodsir Smith, who was art critic of *The Scotsman* at the time, made us feel that we were kindred spirits. There was no gulf between art and literature, so why shouldn't artists write as well. [...] All this, of course, was the exact opposite of our experience in the Art College. Painters who wrote had sold out to literature, to fashionable notions, to spouting forth a load of rubbish, or even to London life styles ... it was deemed far nobler to do one's talking with the brush or the chisel (Moffat, 2009).

As well as the historical artist-writers who were held up as role models, recent and contemporary Scottish artists and writers proved to be hugely influential in Moffat's decision to 'take up the pen'. While Hugh MacDiarmid's influence was dominant, figures such as Sydney Goodsir Smith, William McCance and J D Fergusson were also very important, perhaps especially so because of their concurrent roles as visual artists and writers.<sup>52</sup>

The art critic J. A. Tonge, mentioned earlier, was another significant figure for Moffat:

Tonge was a seminal figure of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, but one who wrote about the visual arts. [He was] extremely cultured, a veteran of Paris and London in the 1930s, who had helped to establish Colquhoun and MacBryde in London. His erudition and seriousness made him an exemplary figure. After meeting Tonge, not to write about art would have seemed perverse (Moffat, 2009).

---

<sup>52</sup> As I have noted, the cultural significance of figures such as Tonge, McCance and Fergusson and their contribution to the discourse on Scottish art has been discussed in depth in Tom Normand's excellent critical study *The Modern Scot*. This thesis looks at the decades following those considered by Normand.

Like Demarco, most of Moffat's writing appeared in exhibition catalogues. From the early 1970s to the present Moffat has steadily continued to write about visual art and whilst his output has never been as prolific as Demarco's or Oliver's, Moffat's writing can nevertheless be seen as representative of particular critical objectives shared by these figures. The writerly features or stylistic characteristics of each artist-writer sometimes differ greatly but there are a number of principles which unite the writing of the 1960s and '70s discussed in this research. Of these principles and approaches the most salient for all three figures was undoubtedly the aim to educate and inform their readership. Coupled with a desire to foster enthusiasm and interest in new directions in contemporary Scottish art, Demarco, Oliver and Moffat endeavoured to use writing as a way to support Scottish art, not only in terms of advocacy, but in terms of attempting to develop an awareness of the need for dialogue and debate around issues in contemporary art. Through writing and curating, Moffat, Demarco and Oliver aimed to encourage artists and audiences to adopt a discursive, critical approach to the production and reception of art in Scotland. Of the three, Moffat in particular has stated this as a specific objective, in direct relation to his desire to elevate the status of visual art (which he saw as lacking yet dependent upon the development of healthy debate, dissent and criticality) to that of literature in Scotland.

It was one of the great topics – 'why aren't people writing about art in Scotland? We'll never get anywhere unless people write about art. Why doesn't the Arts Council set up scholarships or a scheme where young writers could be encouraged to take up the challenge of writing about contemporary art?' It was a common debate and I remember being on the Arts Council in the late 1970s, early 1980s and it was still something that was regularly debated – 'what can we do about this?' (Moffat, 2002).

While Moffat has clearly acknowledged his interest in writing as a student, it was in 1968, when he became Director of the New 57 Gallery, at the same time as working as a photographer for the Scottish Central Library, that his public career in art writing began in earnest:

Taking over the New 57 Gallery presented a number of challenges. At that time, Edinburgh had only three galleries (apart from the then new National Gallery of Modern Art). These were the 57 Gallery, the Richard Demarco Gallery, and the Scottish Gallery, which was regarded as a commercial outlet for the work of senior RSA types. There was a tiny audience for contemporary

art, and little interest in the work of young artists.<sup>53</sup> We would have to explain what we were doing, what the artists were doing. In other words we would have to 'educate' our public, hence the development of the catalogue introduction. The main aim of an introduction was to get the artist's intentions into words all sorts of people could understand. And although agreeing with MacDiarmid that the artist should never simplify his/her work to make it more accessible to the public, it nevertheless seemed essential to involve the public in some kind of intelligent dialogue (Moffat, 2009).

As I discuss later in this chapter, Cordelia Oliver has reiterated Moffat's claims in relation to her own broadsheet art criticism regarding the balance she sought to achieve between educating and engaging her readership whilst simultaneously avoiding over-simplification or condescension. Likewise, Moffat has acknowledged Oliver's role in the attempt to 'involve the public in some kind of intelligent dialogue':

We were greatly helped by both Cordelia Oliver and Edward Gage. Their monthly reviews of our exhibitions were hugely important and they went out of their way to try to get audiences for our exhibitions, often boosting the work of young artists over their elder and more famous counterparts showing with Demarco or in the Scottish Gallery and in the Scottish Arts Council's own gallery. They both contributed essays for 57 Group shows (Moffat, 2009).

Moffat's entry into writing and publishing for an audience, then (or his progression from private to public writing activities), seems to have been spurred on by a sense of obligation and necessity rather than a desire to write 'for writing's sake'. Whilst Oliver, Gage and Goodsir Smith supported the New 57 Gallery in writing, as Moffat noted, 'once you had asked them to do a couple of things, you had exhausted that potential'(Moffat, 2002). In Moffat's words, when he became Director of the New 57 Gallery and began to publish catalogues he 'just jumped in at the deep end' with the pragmatism that the job had to be done:

We started to do some catalogues and the question was who was going to write a catalogue essay [...] Given the fact that absolutely no-one was writing anything about art in Scotland, or

---

<sup>53</sup> In 1972 Cordelia Oliver wrote that the 57 Gallery was 'the first in Edinburgh (pre-Demarco, pre-Traverse) to cater for the avant-garde and the young non-conformist', going on to praise the exhibition held to celebrate the gallery's fifteenth anniversary at Edinburgh University's William Robertson Building (Oliver, *The Guardian*, August 25, 1972, p.8).

very few people writing [I thought] ‘someone’s got to do it – I’m the director of this gallery, maybe I’d better get this done’ (Moffat, 2002).

Moffat remained as Director of the New 57 Gallery for ten years, 1968 to 1978, and his first published catalogue text was written for a Max Beckmann exhibition held at the gallery in 1970. It was followed by further texts for New 57 Gallery catalogues – a foreword for an exhibition of the work of the Scottish Modernist Robert MacBryde in 1972 (MacBryde had died only a few years earlier), a catalogue essay for an exhibition by R. B. Kitaj in 1975, a text for a catalogue for the New 57 Gallery Group (with the Glasgow League of Artists) and an introduction to a catalogue published to accompany a Marcel Broodthaers exhibition in 1977.

As I have briefly outlined, catalogues produced to accompany Moffat’s own work were also being published at this time, almost always including interviews with Moffat or texts on his work written by Alan Bold. In the catalogue published to accompany the 1973 exhibition *A View of the Portrait*, at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, the introduction to the interview which precedes images of the works reflects Moffat’s own view of the function of the catalogue text: ‘[...] it is hoped that the following dialogue between the organisers of the exhibition and Alexander Moffat will help the visitor to understand the artist’s intentions and method’ (Hutchison, 1973, p.6). In a Scottish context, the catalogue is unusual for its time in terms of the space devoted to the articulation – in words – of the critical intentions of the works.<sup>54</sup> In the interview Moffat cites historical precursors and influences (Léger, Picasso, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Grosz, amongst others), discusses the work in relation to the broader genre of portraiture and figurative painting and highlights his interest (following the historical references and his chosen subject matter) in painting as a political act. In discussing his own work here, the emphasis Moffat places on historical and socio-political context abundantly reflects his approach to writing about the work of other artists. The points he stresses in relation to his own work are, likewise, frequent features of his writing on the work of other artists. Whilst it might be an overstatement to say that these points are characteristic of Moffat’s writing (as they are shared by so many other art critics

---

<sup>54</sup> Clearly, of course, there are numerous historical and contemporary examples of publications which focussed on the expression – in words – of the critical intentions of visual artworks. Key art historical publications such as *The Yellow Book*, the Vorticist magazine *Blast* and the numerous tracts, catalogues and pamphlets by groups such as the Surrealists, Dada and Fluxus attest to the emphasis on the written articulation of visual art. My point here is that such publications were extremely rare in a Scottish context, especially in this period. Catalogues, where they existed, were usually composed of reproductions of the artworks along with factual written information such as the artist’s biography, title of works, provenance etc.

and writers, such as Cordelia Oliver), it is perhaps the degree to which Moffat emphasises context and history which make this aspect of his writing identifiable and indicates the presence of a particular position behind the writing. For Moffat writing about art, whatever the specific subject, was part of a larger goal. His indirect manifesto, threaded through many writings, made a case for figurative painting as a valid and politically engaged form of expression (especially in an era dominated by semi-abstract landscapes in Scottish painting) and aimed to elevate the status of visual art in Scotland *through* writing.

In addition to Alan Bold's critical texts on his work and Moffat's own artist's statements (such as the interview in *A View of the Portrait*), several *Guardian* reviews by Cordelia Oliver discussed Moffat's painting. This was perhaps due to Oliver's interest in portraiture and her own experience as a portrait painter (as a student she had excelled at portraiture and harboured an ambition to become a portrait painter). In a review from a group show of portraits at the 57 Gallery in 1970, for example, Moffat's work is singled out for its 'sensitive' treatment of the head and hands and 'how convincing the whole stance and attitude [...] an excellent portrait by most standards'(Oliver, 1970e, p.8).<sup>55</sup> At the same time that Moffat was writing about the work of other artists exhibiting at the 57 Gallery and elsewhere, then, his own work was similarly subject to critical scrutiny and discussion.

In relation both to the individual growth and strength of an artist's practice and the need for Scotland to develop a sophisticated discourse around the production and reception of art, Moffat realised the need, as he saw it, for artists to be able to express themselves not only in paint but in words, in order to critically reflect upon their own work and the work of others and to 'signpost' the critical intentions of their visual art works for an audience in Scotland who tended to be mistrustful of progressive contemporary art. Moffat's anxiety about the lack of a vibrant discourse around contemporary art in Scotland was heightened by his comparisons with the long history of art history and criticism he identified in other European countries:

Everyone who knew about these things looked at other models, European models. The French model is an obvious one where for centuries men of letters and artists had written about art and it's not just people like Baudelaire but a whole host of characters were writing constantly about paintings and sculpture, so it was a highly sophisticated discourse that visual artists would

---

<sup>55</sup> *Rocket* contributor and fellow painter Robert Crozier's self-portrait is also discussed in the same review by Oliver.

automatically find themselves and didn't seem to exist in modern Scotland. You could see that was a huge disadvantage because without books or writing it was difficult to push out beyond local boundaries. You were held back. [...] It seemed essential to start putting things down, to write about things. A culture without writing about the visual arts is going to be very, very limited indeed (Moffat, 2002).

Similarly, within Scotland, Moffat's comparisons between the worlds of literature and visual art added to his sense of frustration that a body of writing and critical discussion seemed not to exist for visual art in the way it did for literature, even amongst his peers. More than anything, then, it was perhaps Moffat's association and involvement with literary figures, as I have already suggested, that bolstered his determination to elevate the reputation of visual art in (and beyond) Scotland. If, as Walter Pater claimed, 'all art aspires to the condition of music', for Moffat, visual art should aspire to the condition, and the status, of literature in contemporary Scotland in the 1960s and '70s:

We knew there was a huge gap, something that had to be overcome. There was this fairly dynamic and energetic literary tradition going on in Scotland, a handful of novelists, a handful of playwrights but because they could write they could be accessed by the wider medium – they were on the radio, on television, they might even get into magazines, weekend supplements, newspapers (Moffat, 2002).

Moffat's Leftist political agenda, and the evidence of this in his writing on the work of other artists, are clearly reflected in the figures he identified as role models, such as the artist and critic John Berger:

I was greatly influenced by John Berger. He was a big influence as he seemed to be the one critic who wasn't bogged down by mere aesthetics. It was blatantly Marxist but at least he tried to relate art to the problems of being human. He would have his regular column in *The Observer* [and] he wrote brilliantly not just about contemporary artists but, every now and then [...] about Bruegel or Rembrandt or Goya, making them seem more contemporary than anything, so that was a tremendous influence (Moffat, 2002).

Through Berger's example and an existing interest in art history (evidenced not only in writing but through visits to exhibitions and association with figures such as Tonge, who was seen as a living link to art history), a recurrent feature of Moffat's writing was (and is) his tendency to situate contemporary art

within a historical context. Moffat's texts frequently employ art historical 'name-checking' as a persuasive tool in attempting to validate the place and significance of contemporary art through art historical reference. Universal, timeless themes are often identified by Moffat in his discussion of contemporary work, as though to establish a lineage or highlight a set of shared concerns from one artistic generation to the next. These writerly features, linked to Moffat's expressed objectives for his writing ('to educate our public' about contemporary art), are convincing and deftly played. Along with Berger, it is likely that Alan Bold was also an influence in this respect. Certainly, as I have discussed, Bold adopted the same kind of historical 'framing' as a rhetorical strategy in his writing on the group of painters he saw as 'Scottish Realists'. For Moffat, then, the famous historical examples cited in his writing were intended as accessible reference points, strategically placed to direct the informed but 'general' reader towards an enhanced understanding or appreciation of contemporary art.

Moffat's language was also carefully used to achieve his stated goal of attempting to 'involve the public in some kind of intelligent dialogue'. In trying to 'get the artist's intentions into words all sorts of people could understand' the clarity of Moffat's prose and the lack of jargon or stylisation reveal not only his desire to engage the public and reach as wide an audience as possible (itself reflective of his Socialist leanings and his firm belief in the social function of art) but a particular stance on criticism itself, as he comments on the writings of Ernst Gombrich illustrate:

[I] obviously knew about people like Clement Greenberg and Hal Rosenberg [and] all the French people but I was tremendously influenced by Gombrich just because of the sheer clarity of his writing and his use of language, maybe because he was writing in a foreign language, in his adopted language English. He made it clear – I suppose the word now is 'user-friendly'. When you re-read Gombrich on anything he's incredibly readable. He was dealing with very problematic, difficult concepts but you can follow them, unlike a lot of contemporary writing about art or aesthetics or critical, latter-day neo-Marxist writing. There are sentences that go on for two or three pages – it's laughable (Moffat, 2002).

In the introduction to a catalogue of Alan Johnston's work, written in 1978, Moffat's text begins by quoting directly from Gombrich's own catalogue introduction, written in 1962 to accompany the Oskar Kokoschka exhibition for the Arts Council of Great Britain, where Gombrich writes, 'Any artist is influenced by the situation in which he finds himself and the intellectual climate in which he matures'



(Gombrich in Moffat, 1978, p.3). The quote prefixes a discussion of Johnston's work, specifically the lack of recognition it had received in 'his native country'. The notion of the 'artist in exile' is a theme which recurs in Moffat's essays in the 1970s and 80s (for instance, in the Art Monthly article on Hugh MacDiarmid and William Johnstone in 1977 and the *Edinburgh Review* essay 'Artists in Exile' of 1986.) The fact that Moffat regarded so many ex-patriate artists as having left the country because of the parochialism of the art world in Scotland can be seen to have underpinned his desire for the development, through writing, of a sophisticated discourse. For Moffat, as excerpts from the research interview highlight, the development of a body of critical writing was seen as instrumental in creating the conditions which would allow Scots artists to receive critical recognition 'at home' (Moffat, 1978, p.3).

In the introduction to the Johnston catalogue, and many others like it, Moffat's prose is crystal clear – straightforward, structured and eminently lucid. Significantly, though, for all its 'straightforwardness', Moffat's strength is that in spite of his brevity he is able, very succinctly, to 'sum up' and neatly encapsulate the essential elements of the artist's work whilst simultaneously managing also to convey something of his own position (especially, in this case, his view of Scotland's treatment of its visual artists) and a plethora of references to art history and broader cultural context. At a little over three hundred words, Moffat's discussion of Johnston covers the artist's recent career (his geographical moves) and discusses the lack of recognition of Johnston's work in Scotland (and the fact that this lack of recognition may, conversely, have given the artist time for a 'distinctive language to develop'). The short text also mentions Cézanne, the eighteenth-century Italian thinker Giambattista Vico (an influence on Johnston at the time), the idea of the 'democratic intellect' said to be characteristic of the Scots ability to embrace a multitude of subjects, and various other aspects of Johnston's work. Several quotations are included, and the short footnotes provide further direction in terms of the ideas which underpin the text (such as works on Vico by Samuel Beckett and Isaiah Berlin). A notable feature of Moffat's texts, then, which reflect his stance on the function and purpose of art criticism, is its directness – the utter lack of verbosity or stylisation. The Johnston text exemplifies Moffat's writing of this period and demonstrates his efforts to 'keep it as clear as possible [...] to think that if some punter were to read it they'd be able to understand it and realise some kind of appreciation. We would bring them in' (Moffat 2002). Again, this quote emphasises the necessity, as Moffat saw it, of trying to 'educate the public', of trying to convince them that contemporary art in Scotland was significant and worthy of attention.

Moffat's position on the uses and function of language in art writing are perhaps the most telling in terms of the shift which can be identified in the writing of a younger generation of writers who emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, and his response to stylistic developments in critical writing in this period, which I will discuss later. Undoubtedly, however, for Moffat lucidity was key – content was of paramount importance, so whilst there are distinctive traits in his writing, there is never a sense that the cultivation of an identifiable style is a concern – the aesthetic form of Moffat's writing never rivals content or subject matter for dominance.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Moffat was a regular writer of artists catalogue essays. Most of these artists were Scottish and almost all were figurative painters. Along with the content and style of Moffat's writing about art, his choice of artist and subject matter reveal his interests and preference in the field of contemporary art. His focus on promoting figurative painting through his role as curator, artist and writer led to his growing reputation as a staunch advocate of Scottish painters whose work concentrated on the human figure, particularly when these works could be seen as manifestations of a politically motivated position surrounding the social responsibility of the artist and the role of art in representing modern Scotland. In the 1970s, as I have mentioned, many of the earliest texts were written by Moffat as part of his position as Director of the New 57 Gallery.

In 1976 Moffat, commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council, selected an exhibition of work for the AIR Gallery in London. The exhibition was intended to represent a group of artists 'typical of the New 57 Gallery' and to change the direction of the 'one-way flow of art' by sending an exhibition of Scottish work to London. The four-person show included work by Michael Docherty, John Kirkwood, Eileen Lawrence and Derek Roberts, and both the selection of works and the accompanying catalogue essay represented a marked departure for Moffat in terms of subject matter, as he acknowledged. As the text progresses, however, Moffat's rationale for the choice of the artists becomes clear:

As a painter who has concentrated mostly on the human figure I have chosen four artists who base their art on abstractions, often from the Landscape. This may appear strange but unfortunately most figurative painting in Scotland is a dull, lifeless mode, tragically ignored by most of the younger artists (Moffat, 1977, p.2).

As in so many of Moffat's texts throughout his career, the discussion of individual works is prefixed by a commentary on the 'state' of contemporary painting. In choosing artists working in a manner almost

diametrically opposed to Moffat's preferred mode, his selection for the AIR Gallery exhibition (intended to be seen as representative of progressive Scottish art in the 1970s) could be read as an attempt by Moffat to throw down the gauntlet to would-be figurative painters. By essentially excluding the very subject matter he considered so essential, Moffat's text seems strategically designed to rally Scottish figurative painters into action. The text then, as much as discussing the work of Docherty, Lawrence, Kirkwood and Roberts, is a provocation, a challenge. The tone, especially in the introduction and conclusion, is combative and lays bare the 'state' and future of Scottish art as Moffat envisages it. Like much of Cordelia Oliver and Richard Demarco's writing, the foundation of the text is a critique of the infrastructure of Scottish visual art as much as it is a challenge to the dominance of abstraction. In the introduction, Moffat attempts to 'set the scene' before discussing each artist in turn, briefly mapping the recent history of art in Scotland (the role of the Scottish Arts Council, Richard Demarco's efforts to bring new European art to audiences in Edinburgh etc.). As always, the discussion of the works themselves are peppered with art historical references. Docherty's work is discussed with reference to Kurt Schwitters, Chardin and Morandi and his still-life paintings are singled out for particular praise. Kirkwood's 'artistic roots', for Moffat, lie in Dada. But even in his pithy discussion of Kirkwood's practice, Moffat takes the opportunity to comment on what he regards as unfavourable tendencies in contemporary art, describing Kirkwood's 'biggest problem' as 'the fact that anti-art objects have been emasculated by the art-world's desire to welcome any new developments with open arms'. In each case, the work of these young artists is validated, or even elevated, via comparison with art historical examples. Eileen Lawrence's work, for example, is compared to Japanese and Chinese calligraphy, and manages to avoid being a 'type of illustration' through careful arrangement and composition. Derek Roberts' work is held against exemplars of non-objective painting in the pioneering abstraction of Cubism, Malevich and Kandinsky. For Moffat, Roberts' interest in these iconic precursors and his focus on life outside the studio 'excuses' his focus on abstraction: 'Although he is an abstract painter his source material lies in the landscape which surrounds his studio', he 'avoids the straight-jacket of endless repetition which is the weakness of much non-objective painting.' Moffat's selection of these artists and his praise of their 'determination of purpose' indicate his ability to consider and appreciate art forms outside his chosen medium. In each small paragraph, though, are the seeds of constructive criticism. Moffat's description of the work is clear and concise, yet within these seemingly objective, descriptive passages, a very subjective set of judgements and observations has been made. Some works are singled out for praise, with the suggestion that the artist should pursue 'this' rather than 'that'

(Docherty's still lives, Kirkwood's photomontages, Roberts' drawings). As with Cordelia Oliver's writing, even in instances, such as this, when Moffat attempts to maintain a sense of neutrality or objectivity (the message here being that he can critically discuss and appreciate works which stand in opposition to his preference for figurative painting), deeper political agendas are at play. In Moffat's writing, like Oliver and Demarco's, there is rarely a text, however brief, which does not employ the space and opportunity to promote a particular point which lies beyond the discussion of specific works. The conclusion of the text is longer than any discussion of individual works (the introduction and conclusion each occupy a third of the overall text, leaving just one third to discuss the work of the four artists) and continues Moffat's discussion of the history, context and contemporary climate for Scottish art. After acknowledging the recent developments and progress for Scottish art and artists (the range of work being shown, the growing number of artists and galleries), Moffat is at pains to highlight the difficulties facing artists in Scotland. Of these, for Moffat 'the problem of style and the difficulty of laying down roots in the face of an ever changing internationalism in the arts' is the most pressing. Along with the 'bewilderment and confusion' caused by the acceleration in the number of 'the latest art world novelties' reaching Scotland, Moffat pinpoints the dearth of private dealers and serious collectors as a major issue, forcing artists such as Kirkwood, Lawrence and Roberts to rely on state aid from the Scottish Arts Council, 'a cause of great concern'.<sup>56</sup> The final section of Moffat's text is a full-blown polemic:

All of this, coupled with the appalling ignorance of the visual arts among the general public and the philistine view of the arts of most local authorities puts the Scottish artist in a less than satisfactory position. It's a position that we've had to put up with for a long time, however, and one which only the most radical social change will alter (Moffat, 1977, p.3).

Moffat finishes by quoting Hugh MacDiarmid, whose views on the role of the arts in Scotland mirrored Moffat's own in almost every respect:

[...] we must survive as Hugh MacDiarmid has done and we should all listen to this great poet's words: 'We have an enormous leeway to make up. I think the resources of the Scots are

---

<sup>56</sup> The concern over the 'dominating force' of the Arts Council and its resistance to change is also the subject of an article by Moffat for the first issue of the London-based *Art Monthly* magazine, also written in 1976. The article proposes a number of reforms to the Scottish Arts Council, with Moffat acting as representative of the Federation of Scottish Artists as author of the text (Moffat, 1976, p.19).

adequate to the purpose; I think we can apply them. But it is not a job that can be done by one man or perhaps even in one lifetime. It may take several generations of intensive work along that line' (Moffat, 1977, p.3).

In trying to address the 'enormous leeway' and attempting to counter the 'appalling ignorance of the visual arts among the general public', Moffat's writing can be seen to have taken on MacDiarmid's mantle in its use of a provocative, antagonistic tone, a rhetorical device designed specifically to generate debate. For MacDiarmid and Moffat, dissent and debate could be harnessed to produce what could, in time, become a sophisticated discourse.

The central aim, then, was to foster critical debate; writing about art was seen as a way to provoke discussion in order to counter the apathy and indifference which, in their view, threatened the future of visual art in Scotland. Writing about art, for Moffat, could help create the conditions necessary in order to nurture and encourage critical reflection in a broader sense. Like Cordelia Oliver and Richard Demarco, there is an undeniable element of dogma and paternalism in Moffat's approach to critical writing and his view of its role. The expressed aim of attempting to 'educate the public' on the part of all three figures attests to this. The writing of this period, then, is ultimately didactic, a monologue going in one direction, from writer to reader. In Moffat's case, however, these 'monologues' were designed to provoke a dialogue. The reviews, essays and articles were written, overall, to elicit a response from the reader and to encourage discussion between those interested in art and culture in Scotland. While heated discussion about the state of art, linked to these texts, often took place informally and socially against the backdrop of pubs, galleries and studios, it took a number of years before the interlocutors of these debates became visible in terms of more formal written exchanges, as I go on to discuss in the following chapter on the writing of artists including Moffat's students Ken Currie and Malcolm Dickson (Moffat, 2002).

By 1979, when Moffat was appointed as a lecturer in the Department of Drawing and Painting at Glasgow School of Art, he had already published numerous catalogue essays, articles and texts, largely through his role at the New 57 Gallery, but his new position paved the way for Moffat's aims to be realised more fully in terms of his commitment to critical writing. Whereas, in the 1970s, he had encouraged writing through direct participation – writing and publishing texts himself on the art and artists he supported (and inviting established critics such as Gage, Goodsir Smith and Oliver to

contribute to New 57 catalogues), his new role allowed Moffat to generate an interest in writing amongst his students. Perhaps more than Moffat's writing per se, it was his encouragement of writing practice amongst young artists in the early 1980s that had a profound and lasting effect on art writing in Scotland. The legacy and impact of Moffat's influence will be discussed more fully through a consideration of the work of his students, notably Ken Currie and Malcolm Dickson, in the following chapter. It is worthwhile, though, to say something here of his role in helping to create the conditions necessary for writing about art to flourish in Scotland.

More than perhaps any other factor, Moffat's encouragement of writing amongst his students had a profound impact purely by virtue of his example – the fact that he was a practising artist and writer, while unremarkable today, was, in the climate of 1970s and 1980s Scottish art education, a strong statement in itself, as Moffat has recalled:

I had never found it difficult [to work as an artist and critic]. It's probably because I was running a gallery and was working with all sorts of different artists anyway – putting on exhibitions, promoting their work, getting to know them. So writing was just a development of those things. But the old guys, the older artists, used to say 'You don't need to write about art son. That's bad. This is visual art, man, don't write about it. You're just playing into the hands of the pseudo intellectuals.' There was a lot of opposition from the older guys (Moffat, 2002).

Much of this opposition was directly linked to curriculum changes enforced by findings of the Coldstream Reports and the introduction of the DipAD and then BA Degree system, as discussed earlier. These changes, especially the introduction of an assessed written component of students' studies, were fiercely resisted by tutors at Glasgow School of Art. As a student at Edinburgh College of Art in the 1960s, Moffat had sought out opportunities to write about art and artists but by the time he was teaching, critical and historical writing had become an assessed, compulsory element of an art school education and the changes proved to be hugely controversial:

There was tremendous opposition when I first arrived here [at Glasgow School of Art] to the very tiny Liberal Studies Department which was about one and a half guys at that stage. There was massive opposition. 'Close it down! It's just getting in the road. It's filling our student's heads with mumbo jumbo!' I just thought of it as part of my job as someone who was an artist

in Scotland and who was working on many levels – the level of teaching, the level of curating, the level of writing (Moffat, 2002).

As an artist and writer who had never regarded the two fields as mutually exclusive spheres of interest, Moffat also believed that artists should be encouraged to look to the past and see the relevance and benefit of art historical knowledge to an understanding of contemporary art practice. His critical writing clearly demonstrates this belief, frequently drawing on art historical examples as a contextual and interpretative tool through which to consider art of the present. Some of his contemporaries at both Glasgow School of Art and Edinburgh College of Art felt differently. The attitude, like that of the RSA in the 1960s, seemed to be that an artist had to choose between production of work and criticism. This view was at odds in the perception of specialisation, one that ran counter to the production of knowledge found in the concept of the democratic intellect. Much of the resistance to the notion of ‘artists writing’ seemed, however, to stem from a fear that exposed to art criticism and art magazines students would be unduly influenced by passing trends and fashions in international art. It may have proved naive to assume that students could ever have operated in a rarified ‘vacuum’, isolated from the polluting dangers of ‘fashionable’ art which threatened to dilute their ‘vision’, yet undoubtedly, the perception still prevails that creative work will be compromised through contact with wider ideas, that the critic’s job should be left to critics. Clearly, while perhaps rather extreme, not all of the opposition to reading and writing about art was sheer philistinism or anti-intellectualism on the part of the ‘old school’ contingent of art school staff. For some, Harold Bloom’s notion of the ‘anxiety of influence’ could indeed lead to a kind of creative paralysis (and it is clear that art school students today frequently emulate or ape the style or aesthetic of the latest ‘new direction’ in the pages of magazines such as *Frieze*).

For Moffat, however, the alternative, ‘blissful ignorance’ and a wilful lack of engagement with history, theory or context was too easy – artists, he felt, had a responsibility to develop ‘an awareness about their culture’ just as he had done through his longstanding interest not only in historical works of art, but in the discipline of art history and art historical writing, as he has noted:

Reading Gombrich got me on to some of those other historians that have been slightly forgotten about now, like Panofsky and Edgar Wind. He wrote a brilliant book – a series of radio lectures – on the fragment. That was very influential – I devoured all of the Germanic historians who had fled Hitler. They laid down a whole territory that was influential for me (Moffat, 2002).

In an essay written in 1987, Moffat again acknowledged his debt to art historical writing, noting that 'up until this point [the mid 1960s] most of my ideas had come through reading (Berger, Blunt, Wind) and from my contacts with certain Scottish poets' (Moffat, 1987, p.41).

In spite of the divisions between quarters of art school staff who supported the addition of an assessed, written component to an art school education and those who were trenchantly opposed to these changes, Moffat continued to write regularly on art and artists throughout the 1980s, contributing to the revival of the maker-writer demonstrated by Crozier, Bold and Oliver. Again, much of Moffat's writing centred on Scottish painting, including texts on Moffat's friend and fellow ECA graduate John Bellany (for the Pier Arts Centre in Orkney in 1984 and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in 1985). Other texts written in the 1980s included catalogue essays for Scottish Arts Council exhibitions such as *Scottish Young Contemporaries* in 1981 and *Pictures of Ourselves* in 1982, an exhibition of contemporary self-portraits by Scottish artists. *Pictures of Ourselves* reiterated Moffat's commitment to portraiture and the human figure in both the curatorial theme and selection of works, and through the accompanying text. Several key, recurring themes prevalent throughout Moffat's writing are discussed in the text. *A View of the Portrait*, Moffat's own exhibition and catalogue from 1973, can be seen as a forerunner for Moffat's return to the subject as curator and writer for *Pictures of Ourselves*. Much of Moffat's writing throughout his career acted as a kind of manifesto for Scottish figurative painting and its relevance as a contemporary art form. His writings of the early 1980s are particularly focused on 'defending' painting as a medium and figurative painting in particular as a valid and valuable discipline. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s (relative to Scotland) abstract painting had been seen as the great opponent to the figurative tradition, the explosion of new media and 'expanded' fields for traditional visual art disciplines appeared to pose another, more invidious threat to painting. In short, the central argument surrounding painting in Scotland was no longer reserved purely for subject matter (in vulgar terms, amounting to the stand-off between abstract and figurative works). Painting itself had been challenged. Clearly, concerns over the relevance and function of painting had been well established in broader art historical terms, through such 'threats' as the advent of photography over one hundred years earlier, for example, but in a specifically Scottish context, painting had always maintained its dominance throughout the twentieth century, in spite of the emergence of new forms and practices elsewhere. And whilst figures such as Richard Demarco's enterprises to introduce Scotland to avant-garde performance and installation work in the 1970s and Moffat's own curatorial activity at the New 57



Gallery showcased such developments, painting – as a medium – had not, yet, been perceived as outmoded. The text for *Pictures of Ourselves* attempts to redress the taxonomy of painting through an explanation for the ‘low standing of portraiture amongst many artists’. Again, Moffat turned to the writings of John Berger and numerous art historical examples to critically frame his position:

John Berger has written ‘After Géricault, professional portraiture degenerated into servile and crass personal flattery, cynically undertaken.’ This is a judgement which seems impossible to refute. Since the French Revolution the important artists of Western Europe increasingly shunned official portraiture and concentrated on painting their friends and themselves (Moffat, 1982, p.2).

In terms of art historical figures used to substantiate his claim that ‘many of the greatest masterpieces of the twentieth century are portraits’, Moffat relies upon a roll-call of artists frequently mentioned in interviews, essays and other texts – Picasso, Beckmann, Kokoschka, Schiele, Modigliani, Bacon. In terms of textual references, alongside Moffat’s interest in the critical historians of art (mentioned earlier) it is perhaps significant that so many of the quotes and texts he draws upon in his own writing are themselves the writing of practising artists. In this text alone, the quotations used are from Berger, Matisse (quoted by R. B. Kitaj) and Moffat’s own interview text from the *Seven Poets* exhibition, held the previous year. Throughout his body of writing (see, for example, the texts for the *British Art Show* in 1984 and *Seven Poets* in 1981) artist-writers are frequently quoted, from those who pursued a parallel career as writers or critics, such as John Berger, Herbert Read and Timothy Hyman (with whom Moffat had exhibited in 1979/1980 in the touring exhibition *Narrative Paintings*), to more occasional texts by artists whose writings and lectures had proved influential, such as Ron Kitaj, Peter de Francia, David Hockney and Max Beckmann.<sup>57</sup>

Moffat became a crucial figure in attempting to position and ‘defend’ painting as a valid medium in an era dominated by attempts to theorise the role of painting in relation to postmodernism in visual art. One of many examples of this attempt to act as an advocate for contemporary figurative painting is trenchantly expressed in the catalogue for *Pictures of Ourselves*:

---

<sup>57</sup> Moffat had selected Peter de Francia’s work for an exhibition at the Camden Arts Centre in 1977 and was hugely influenced by him as a critical thinker – see the 1987 catalogue essay by Moffat in *Peter de Francia, Painter and Professor* (Moffat, 1987).

Many Scottish painters regard the content of a picture as immaterial and condemn any reference in painting to human relationships as literary. This narrow dogma would be utterly rejected by John Bellany [...] who has created what is possible the most significant body of self-portraits in recent years (Moffat, 1982, p.5).

Moffat's reference to the antithesis of Greenbergian Modernism set him up as an opponent of the 'narrow dogma' he identified in Greenberg's theories of Modernist art (specifically, the insistence on abstraction as the formal vehicle through which to achieve Kantian aesthetic disinterestedness through the removal of external 'reference'). But Moffat was also ambivalent towards the formal 'alternatives' to painting posed by new media and post-studio practices, which threatened to destabilise painting's dominance as the pre-eminent visual art discipline. Such emergent practices were championed by post- or anti-Greenbergian scholars represented by the *October* School of art historians, critics who favoured photography, performance, video and installation. In the process, painting was quickly cast as the reactionary and neo-conservative 'villain' of postmodernism, seen as representative of everything about 'the canon' that critical postmodernism attempted to contest. In visual art, painting was seen to embody all of the ideological ills of Western hegemonic power (characterised as patriarchal, white, Western, heterosexual, etc.).

In his essay for the *New Image Glasgow* catalogue in 1985 (discussed in detail later in this chapter), Moffat's text refers directly to Benjamin Buchloh's essay 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Repression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Paintings', published in *October* in 1981 (Buchloh, 1981, pp.39-68). In a strategically critical manner, Moffat opens his discussion by highlighting the counter-argument to his view of the 'New Painting' and return to figuration, which he acknowledges 'has been criticised as a symptom of increasing political conservatism and authoritarianism in the Western World' – the footnote accompanying this sentence refers the reader to Buchloh's essay as an example of these claims Moffat, of course, sets out in the essay to disprove such accusations.

Several of Moffat's essays of the early 1980s are preoccupied with these debates. Indeed, the rising antagonism towards painting *as a medium* seemed to strengthen Moffat's resolve and belief in its value. The indifference and apathy of the Scottish art world towards Bold and Moffat's repeated calls for a return to figuration in the 1970s had given way in the 1980s to international debates over the 'state' of painting in relation to postmodernism, as I have noted. These broader debates provided Moffat with a

renewed opportunity to promote painting as a medium and the human figure as a subject, and he took on opponents with relish. Again, while he denied the 'high Modernist' theories of Greenberg and formalists such as Michael Fried (theories characterised by calls for medium-specific purity, etc.), Moffat was also aware of the attempts by the *October* School to challenge the European tradition (represented most obviously by painting) and establish what was beginning to look like an anti-European, pro-American canon of postmodernism (through such groups as the 'Pictures Generation', championed by Craig Owens and journals such as *Artforum*).

The early 1980s saw Moffat's critical and curatorial activity centre on the work of a new generation of artists who had been taught by him at Glasgow School of Art. *Seven Poets*, Moffat's own major exhibition of literary portraits held in 1981, marked the beginning of his ongoing association with the Third Eye Centre as exhibiting artist, writer and curator throughout the 1980s. The paintings exhibited in *Seven Poets* cemented Moffat's already established reputation as a portrait painter, and emphasised his commitment to Scottish literary figures as a subject. *Seven Poets* saw Moffat continue a body of work showcased in the 1973 exhibition *A View of the Portrait*, bringing together the two most significant aspects of Moffat's practice and approach – his belief and respect for Scottish literature as an international ambassador for Scottish culture and his loyalty to figurative painting. As well as the profile of the exhibition itself (which toured throughout the UK), the accompanying publication was unusual for the time in terms of length, depth of discussion and the use of some full-colour reproductions. It was an expensive affair, funded by the Scottish Arts Council and edited by the Third Eye Centre Director Christopher Carrell. A nine-page interview with Moffat, by Timothy Hyman, outlined Moffat's aims and objectives for the work. Inspired by a suggestion from Peter de Francia, Moffat had decided to paint this specific generation of Scottish poets, influenced by the literary portraits of Munch and, in particular, Degas, whose portraits of Diego Martelli and Duranty were held in Scottish collections. It is clear, from the interview and the project itself, that Moffat believed 'these poets have played the leading role, both in their verse and prose in shaping the artistic conscience of the country' (Moffat, 1981, p.7). At this point, Moffat's hopes for visual art to reach the same heights that he saw in contemporary Scottish literature had not been brought to fruition. *Seven Poets* seemed almost an attempt for Moffat to bring together these hopes in a literal sense, painting portraits of the Scottish poets who had so encouraged and inspired him as a young man. Of the seven, Alan Bold, Hugh MacDiarmid and Sydney Goodsir Smith had all had a direct influence on Moffat in terms of their views on visual art, but as well as acting as a

homage to these figures, the exhibition, and the catalogue text in particular, gave Moffat an opportunity to expand upon several recurrent themes discussed earlier in this section. Firstly, throughout the interview, Moffat refers to both art historical and contemporary precedents of his work, citing (amongst many others) R. B. Kitaj, David Hockney and Peter de Francia as contemporary influences alongside earlier figures such as Picasso, Kokoschka, Beckmann, Dix and Balthus. Numerous other artists are also mentioned (too many to list) such as Poussin, Rembrandt and Raphael, Goya, Breughel, Dürer, Cranach and Goya. As ever, then, Moffat applies the same critical strategies to the interpretation and explanation of his own work that he in turn employs in discussion of the work of other artists. Like Cordelia Oliver, Moffat also emphasised his interest in 'the arts' more broadly, and highlighted his interest in the relationship between visual art, literature and music. Like Cordelia Oliver's discussion of the performing arts in relation to visual art in her writing, Moffat's insistence on discussing other art forms is more meaningful than a simple acknowledgement of interest or enthusiasm for literature or music. Moffat and Oliver's frequent determination to consider the arts in Scotland as a holistic cultural community with shared goals underscores their philosophy and approach to visual art. They celebrated cross-over, interplay and collaboration between art forms and practitioners and sought out opportunities to participate across fields and disciplines, whilst maintaining their integrity and dedication to the pursuit and promotion of Scottish painting. In the interview, Timothy Hyman notes this interest, asking, 'Do you think your interest in music has interlocked with your painting?' Moffat replied:

Yes, I think there's been a definite merging. I look upon certain aspects of my painting in musical terms. I would say that nowadays my colour is more 'Straussian' – this idea of sensuous orchestration. I was against Strauss ten years ago, thinking him superficial in comparison with Mahler or Berg. Now I can see that, in simple terms, Strauss was more concerned with beauty than truth. I've been influenced a little by this (Moffat, 1981, p.12).

Moffat goes on to discuss his interest in poetry, both Scottish and international, and his views of writing more broadly. Writing is described as 'the true medium of the prophet', whilst journalism is discussed in relation to the late 1970s *Berliners* paintings:

In many ways they are the most objective of all my paintings. This may be because they are about a journalist. I admire the journalist's sense of reality, his dedication, his involvement in epoch-making events, and the disciplined way he distances himself from those events in his

attempts to write truthfully. Yes, I think these qualities are useful for the artist' (Moffat, 1981, p.13).

Following the interview with Moffat, Neal Ascherson's essay "Seven Poets" (Ascherson, 1981, pp.17-31) considers each of the seven poets in turn, offering a summary of their work and approach. The rest of the catalogue features interviews with the six surviving poets (MacDiarmid died in 1978, two years before the exhibition) and selections of their poetry, interspersed with Moffat's paintings and drawings. In this way, again, Moffat can be seen to have very directly brought together his two predominant cultural interests – Scottish painting and literature.

In 1985 Moffat curated the exhibition *New Image Glasgow*, an exhibition of the work of Stephen Barclay, Steven Campbell, Ken Currie, Peter Howson, Adrian Wiszniewski and Mario Rossi. In 1981 Moffat had already written a text for an Edinburgh Festival exhibition of Peter Howson's work and he went on to write several essays for (and on) the work of Ken Currie (including a foreword to the 2003 catalogue for Currie's solo show at Glasgow School of Art). He continued also to write (and lecture on) the work of Adrian Wiszniewski (e.g. the 1991 catalogue essay for Wiszniewski's exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery) and the work of Steven Campbell. Campbell's work had been shown for the first time at a group show at the New 57 Gallery the year before his degree show at Glasgow School of Art. Moffat, along with Jim Birrell, was instrumental in Campbell's selection for *Expressive Images* at the New 57 and Moffat's own interests, and indeed his own student 'rebellion' via painting in the mid-1960s, were reflected in the work and approach of his student (references to Courbet and Léger, for example).

It would not be an overstatement to claim that the way in which Moffat brought together the group of artists who would become known in the Scottish media as the New Glasgow Boys did more to attract the attention of the international art world to Scotland than anything else in twentieth-century Scottish art up to this point. Crucially, in terms of this research, Moffat's 'project' was utterly reliant on the critical and curatorial construction of a 'school' of artists. Through strategically arranged group exhibitions and accompanying interpretative texts, Moffat heralded a group of painters as the Scottish manifestation of an international shift towards neo-expressionism and figuration, represented by figures such as Francesco Clemente, Georg Baselitz and Sandro Chia. Following earlier, more modest attempts, Scottish New Image painting achieved what Alan Bold (and Moffat and Bellany themselves) had set out

to accomplish in the 1960s and 1970s, through Bold's curatorial and critical grouping of Moffat, Bellany, Bill Gillon, Ian McLeod and Robert Crozier as representative of a new 'Scottish Realism', as discussed.<sup>58</sup>

It would be naive, therefore, to assume that the meteoric rise of the New Image Glasgow painters was not reliant on a sophisticated understanding of the way in which curating and criticism is able to establish, validate and historicise otherwise rather fragmented, disparate practices. The antagonism towards the dominance of abstraction, coupled with the fervent desire to find a place for painting amidst the explosion of emergent forms and practices in the late 1970s and early '80s, allowed Moffat an ideal opportunity to (critically) capitalise on these shifts in contemporary art, and to harness such debates in order to promote the work of his former students.

It should be noted, however, that although he was a staunch advocate of painting Moffat was far from being a medium-specific Formalist, and regarded the strict battle lines and dichotomies between disciplines as false and reductive. As his essay for Docherty, Kirkwood, Lawrence and Roberts had highlighted, whilst he clearly preferred painting and regarded it as the most significant medium in fine art, he was not directly opposed to other forms of visual expression 'on principle'. He had worked as a photographer for several years in the 1960s and as a tutor had been supportive of the film work of students such as Ken Currie and Steven Campbell's interest in performance. Undeniably, however, Moffat was committed most fervently to the pursuit and promotion of contemporary painting in Scotland above all else. But, perhaps surprisingly given the rhetoric surrounding neo-expressionism and the return to the figure, Moffat's view of painting was closely allied to two defining characteristics of the critical (as opposed to neo-conservative) postmodern 'project'. If painting were to hold its own as a contemporary, progressive medium (rather than being regarded as a moribund, reactionary mode, as its critics maintained), it was crucial that the 'New Painting' reflected the ideological and political aims of critical postmodernism. In this way, the particular works Moffat highlighted could be regarded as embodying the postmodernist aims of presenting 'a critique on the grounds of difference' and 'a critique on the grounds of originality' (Harrison & Wood, 1992, p.989).

---

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, the Scottish Arts Council Gallery exhibition and catalogue *Scottish Realism* of 1971 with an essay by Alan Bold, and the 1975 *Rocket* Publications catalogue for the group exhibition of the work of Moffat, Bellany, Neil Dallas Brown and Bill Gillon.

In relation to the first aspect (postmodernism as a 'critique on the grounds of difference') Moffat saw the 'New Painting' as a way for women and working-class artists to 'take on' the titans of bourgeois Scottish painting as represented by the elder statesmen of the RSA. He also regarded the new generation of painters as a way for Scottish artists to reassert themselves in a British and European context – to write themselves back in to the history of European art, having been disenfranchised and overshadowed by English colonial rule.<sup>59</sup> The majority of the artists Moffat supported as a critic and curator in the 1980s were working-class Glaswegians, and several (at that time) were committed to radical leftist views. In this way, Moffat saw painting as the ideal form through which to reassess the tradition of Scottish painting itself (i.e. through a return to the human figure) and to contest the class-based power relations of the art world in Scotland. In other words, Moffat fostered the notion of using 'painting to establish the limits of painting' rather than renouncing painting in favour of identifying a new formal language in order to destabilise the status quo (as many prominent painters had done in the period, leaving painting to pursue other media). In the *Pictures of Ourselves* text, Moffat's discussion of the work of June Redfern and Fionna Carlisle also highlighted his awareness of broader ideological and cultural shifts made visible by postmodern developments in art and theory, namely 'the role of the female artist [which] has changed considerably in the last decade thanks to the upsurge of feminist awareness' (Moffat, 1982, p.5).<sup>60</sup>

In his critical framing of New Image painting, Moffat also saw the works as being linked to the second defining aspect of postmodernism in visual art – 'a critique on the grounds of originality'(Harrison & Wood, 1992, p.989). He wrote that through the eclectic appropriation of art historical tropes 'the new imagery [...] more often than not suggests the adaptation of old imagery and the conspicuous use of models recognised as belonging to art and to art history [...] with its stress and dependence on symbols and emblems' (Moffat, 1985, p.5).

In terms of a critical strategy, what is significant about 'Telling Stories', the essay for *New Image Glasgow*, is that Moffat once more introduces (and perhaps seeks to pre-empt) counter-arguments by

---

<sup>59</sup> A staunch follower of MacDiarmid, Moffat freely admitted his dislike of England and Englishness in this period – see, for instance the essay on Peter de Francia 'I was rather hostile to Englishness in those days' (Moffat, 1987 p.41).

<sup>60</sup> In retrospect, this commitment to female artists and feminism is ironic given the later hostility towards Moffat which was often couched in terms of gender and his supposed encouragement of the 'machismo' of New Image painting. In his 1986 *Edinburgh Review* text, for instance, Malcolm Dickson specifically asks why no women were included in the New Image group and why issues of sexuality and identity were absent from the works (Dickson, 1986b, p.174). In 1999, Ross Sinclair similarly accused the New Image painters of embracing 'the myth of the male artist toiling away in his studio' (Sinclair, 1999).

discussing and freely acknowledging the potential pitfalls and weaknesses of the types of work he champions here, noting that ‘the current focus on New Painting has prevented the development of figurative art by encouraging a largely uncritical and unreflective style of personal expression.’ From an acknowledgement of the limitations of the New Painting (and the discourse surrounding it), Moffat sets out to demonstrate how the viewer should ‘read’ the work of the Glasgow painters, relying as always on historical context – the history of figurative and expressive painting in Glasgow via Colquhoun, Macbryde, Eardley and Crozier – and the dominant tradition of landscape as a subject for Scottish painting. This strategy achieves two important aims: it distances Scottish New Image painting from the negative associations of empty stylisation or hollow ‘fashion’ in art by attempting to establish a lineage for the work in a Scottish context; and it simultaneously highlights Moffat’s longstanding belief that debate and discussion are vital for the ‘health’ of contemporary art (‘the fact remains that painting per se is now worthy of serious discussion as a radical and contemporary art’). By entering into these debates and contributing to the discourse on the ‘role’ of painting in the 1980s, Moffat had achieved his critical *raison d’être* – to generate ‘serious discussion’ of art.

The *New Image Glasgow* text contains a rich array of densely layered references and directions which function to locate and situate the works in a geographical and historical context. In this respect, Moffat’s writing bears comparison to that of Cordelia Oliver – both writers demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility towards the reader, managing to condense a huge amount of information into a succinct catalogue essay. The distillation of so much material, grounded in a thorough knowledge and understanding of painting on the part of both writers, marks them out as two of the most complex and sophisticated art critics in Scotland in that period. Their ability to distil an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of art history and painting was (and is) extremely rare in the form of the review or catalogue essay and in many of their essays they reached a level of scholarship usually reserved for longer academic texts and written for academic audiences. But Moffat and Oliver’s commitment to education outwith the rarified groves of academe serves to underline their leftist political principles – that anyone with a genuine interest in art should be allowed the opportunity to access it. Their writing fulfilled this role.

To come back to the *New Image Glasgow* essay in particular, Moffat’s enthusiasm and belief in the works is abundantly clear, not least through the inclusion of a diverse, stimulating array of references and examples peppered throughout the essay. There is no doubt that Moffat was a firm advocate of



these painters, but that his readers agreed with his position is never taken for granted. The writing, while rather polemical, is not assumptive in tone and works extremely hard to persuade and convince the reader of the significance and value of the works. What seems remarkable, in retrospect, is that many of the later criticisms of Moffat and *New Image* are answered fully in the essay, such as the criticism surrounding the notion that the painters constituted a 'group' (the essay openly acknowledges that it 'would be a mistake' to 'imply that these six artists form a proper group'). Similarly, attempts at revisionist interpretations of, for instance, Steven Campbell's painting have their roots in Moffat's original essay.<sup>61</sup>

The year before the *New Image Glasgow* exhibition, Moffat had been one of the curators of the second *British Art Show*. In the three essays he contributed to the catalogue Moffat wrote extensively on his view of contemporary painting. In the essays, entitled 'New Painting and Old Painting: A Precarious Spontaneity or an Outmoded Tradition', 'Reinventing the Real World' and 'Retrieving the Image', Moffat was given a rare opportunity to expound on his long-held ideas about painting as well as presenting a manifesto for the New Painting. Each lengthy essay featured critical criteria which had been present in many of Moffat's writings to this point, though in these texts there is less of an explicitly Scottish dimension to the argument. The texts are important in that they mark a specific period for contemporary art in which the very subjects on which Moffat had been campaigning since the mid-1960s began to dominate the art world. In a British context, this had been pursued by, amongst others, Moffat's friends Timothy Hyman and R. B. Kitaj. As well as their writing on the subject, both Kitaj and Hyman had promoted painting in an era for contemporary art which largely considered figurative painting to be retrograde or moribund. Their manifesto-like insistence on the role of painting was showcased through both writing (such as Hyman's writing for *Artscribe* magazine) and curating. Two of the most important exhibitions dedicated to paintings of people in the period were curated by Kitaj (the 1976 exhibition *The Human Clay*) and Hyman (*Narrative Paintings* exhibition of 1979/1980). Moffat was an exhibiting artist in both exhibitions and his close association with these figures demonstrates again that he represented the Scottish contingent of a growing critical mass who championed the role and value of figurative painting. Whilst Moffat's interests at this time were firmly rooted in the promotion of

---

<sup>61</sup> In the last ten years Neil Mulholland has been regarded as an important critic of Campbell's work. The perception of Mulholland's writings on Campbell, however, especially amongst audiences less familiar with Moffat's writing, has been that he has revealed aspects of the artist's practice not previously discussed or acknowledged, such as Campbell's interest in the novels of P. G. Wodehouse, amongst other features.

an identifiably Scottish tradition in painting, he can nevertheless be regarded, in a broader context, as the Scots counterpart to his peers (such as de Francia, Kitaj and Hyman) who similarly pursued a return to figurative painting as a visible, relevant and critically robust contemporary art practice.

In a reflection of many earlier statements, in writing and curating, Moffat quoted from Kitaj's text for the *Human Clay* catalogue in his first essay for the *British Art Show*:

[Kitaj] made a claim for the renewal of a specific European tradition of pictorial description allied to a concern for the social value of a humanist art. 'Don't listen to the fools that say either that pictures of people can be of no consequence or that painting is finished. There is much to be done' (Moffat, 1984, p.17).

The modus operandi of all three figures – Kitaj, Hyman and Moffat – are markedly similar in that each worked primarily as a practising painter but in each case (to a greater or lesser degree) each of the three also simultaneously took on the role of critical writer, curator and educationalist. This polymathic approach strengthened their position, allowed numerous outlets and avenues for the dissemination of their ideas and enabled them to reach wide audiences. The *British Art Show* presented Moffat with an opportunity to present his ideas through curating and writing, but on a far larger scale, and with a hugely increased audience, than he had achieved to this point. It also cemented his role as an important advocate of figurative painting in an international context.

In the first essay, 'New Painting and Old Painting: A Precarious Spontaneity or an Outmoded Tradition?' Moffat attempted to situate the recent developments in painting by tracing the dominant trends and directions of post-war art. In doing so, he concurrently made strong claims for the importance of the 'New Painting' as a mode which had 'overcome' tremendous threats to its survival. In Moffat's words, the return to figuration in the 1980s signalled a defiance of the 'hegemony of Abstraction' as '*the* twentieth century tradition' (Moffat, 1984, p.17). As well as acting as a critique of the dominance of abstraction, Moffat also saw the 'return' to painting as evidence that more recent developments in art, namely Conceptualism, had been unable to supersede or destabilise the significance and the 'pull' of painting as a medium. As he noted:

During the seventies, however, Abstract painting was forced to give way as the vanguard movement to a group of Conceptual artists for whom the idea or concept of art outweighed the

finished product. The Conceptualists played down formalist and imagist objectives in favour of investigative exercises. By abandoning traditional forms of painting and sculpture they also replaced the art object – the finished permanent art work – by a process, a strategy, relating to language, history and politics. Within this framework of ideas the difficulties in establishing any kind of painterly image as a serious alternative proved enormous (Moffat, 1984, p.17).

Although, undoubtedly, Moffat was staunchly supportive of the New Painting, he nevertheless acknowledged the potential pitfalls of the fact it had quickly become a fashionable (and potentially lucrative) mode of contemporary art, noting that ‘the current focus on New Painting seems to have limited the development of figurative art, encouraging a largely negative and uncritical self-expression’ (Moffat, 1984, p20).

The three essays, then, can be seen as longer, more detailed and broader discussions of the very issues Moffat would deal with in the *New Image* essay the following year – some passages are almost identical or are repeated verbatim. In the *British Art Show* catalogue, though, much of what Moffat discusses in the context of ‘British’ painting in the *British Art Show* texts is narrowed down in focus to allow for a more specific consideration of Scottish art in the *New Image Glasgow* catalogue. The disadvantages outlined in relation to British art in the *British Art Show* catalogue are reiterated in the *New Image* text with specific reference to the particular, peculiar circumstances encountered by Scottish artists. It is clear, in ‘Telling Stories’, the *New Image* essay, that Moffat has realised (and relishes) the chance to get back to a partisan, perhaps less measured, discussion of Scotland and Scottishness, without the expectations implicit in a discussion of ‘British’ art (as in the *British Art Show* text). Whatever their differences or similarities, both publications certainly signal a growing critical confidence and the culmination and resolution of the ideas and issues pursued by Moffat for almost two decades.

Apart from being one of the few commentators in the period to consider both the advantages and disadvantages of this ‘return to figuration’ (the majority of critics were firmly ‘pro’ or ‘anti’), what also distinguishes Moffat as a critical writer in this period is his refusal to engage with the increasing verbosity which dogged much writing on art in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the overtly stylised use of language which would characterise art writing in Scotland in the following decades. As the cited examples demonstrate, Moffat’s ability to explain some of the most dense and over-theorised shifts in art history in such succinct, engaging and legible prose are a testament to his ability as a writer. But his

success in producing lucid prose on complex issues also represents his critical principles. The impenetrable use of language now characteristic of postmodern theory was at odds with Moffat's earlier stated desire for his writing to be clear and easily understood. His admiration for John Berger's writings is understandable in this respect, especially given Berger's attempts to translate 'academese' into plain English in the 1970s and '80s (through, for example, his involvement in the collaboratively written book and TV series *Ways of Seeing* which successfully attempted to popularise the ideas of Walter Benjamin and introduce Marxist readings of art to the general public). In an essay on the work of Peter de Francia, written in 1987, Moffat reiterated his critical principles in an explicit manner. Discussing his approach as a visual artist and speaking of the goals he shared with John Bellany, Moffat wrote that they sought: 'to address ourselves to the problems of making a complex art of ideas [...] but which would renounce any form of obscurity or esotericism, and would communicate with others' (Moffat, 1987, p.40).

The following chapter considers a generation of artist-writers who emerged in the 1980s, largely in Glasgow. Much of the writing I will discuss centres around a small group of Glasgow School of Art graduates, many taught by Moffat, who founded or contributed to the art magazine *Variant*. I will also return to a consideration of Moffat's influence on this younger group in relation to a series of texts written for the *Edinburgh Review* in the mid-1980s, which both supported and contested Moffat's critical and curatorial promotion of the Scottish New Image painters. As well as considering the debate itself, and how it was expressed, the aim of this discussion will be to emphasise that Moffat's significance in the context of this research is weighted equally between his own writing and his influence in encouraging younger artists to write about art.

Finally, as a comparative analysis, I will come back to Moffat's views on the role of style, form and language in art criticism, which is at odds with the experimental and stylised forms of the subsequent generation. Crucially, I reiterate the points already raised – that the texts produced by the artist-writers considered up to this point can be seen as representative of a particular mode of critical writing, characteristic of the period in which they appeared.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Writin' is Fightin': *Stigma, Variant* and the *Edinburgh Review* in the '80s:**

If the 1970s in Scotland were devoted to creating the necessary conditions for critical writing to flourish, the art criticism which followed in the early 1980s was characterised by a sense of urgency on the part of a new group of artist-writers who dealt directly with the socio-political issues they saw as being inseparable from any discussion of contemporary art practice. In the '70s, the primary concern for the artists, writers and curators dissatisfied with the complacency of the art world in Scotland was to 'educate the public' to whom new directions in contemporary art were disorientating and foreign. Press coverage and catalogue essays were instrumental in asserting the importance of change within the Scottish art world and introducing both the art world itself and broader audiences for art to work which challenged the prevailing taste and style of the academy tradition.

In the early 1980s, a new generation of artist-critics emerged in Glasgow. Perhaps coincidentally, many of these artists were amongst the first to have studied under the new curricula introduced to Scottish art schools in the 1970s – notably, amongst the changes was the inclusion of an assessed written component. The first body of critical writing produced by these writers appeared in magazines they had established. This chapter looks in detail at the writers and publications that essentially 'set the scene' for a growing critical division which continued throughout the decade. This division was not purely between the reactionary and progressive factions within the art world in Scotland (as had largely been the case in the 1970s) but, as the critical writing of the period reveals, between those groups and individuals who identified themselves as leftist. More than any other feature, a growing political commitment can be seen within these writings yet this commitment was decisively split between traditional class-based leftist views (a legacy of earlier writings in the '60s and '70s) and a younger, more radically counter-culture political positioning. The stance adopted by the writers, artists and emergent critics of the period not only presented different, often oppositional viewpoints regarding the social function of art, but also informed the types of art works each party deemed worthy of attention and discussion (i.e. art works which they saw as representative of their views). This chapter seeks to identify the motivation for these differing critical positions through an analysis of the writings and publications themselves.

In the 1970s the necessary cultural conditions were established in Scotland to allow for a genuine body of critical writing to emerge in the 1980s. It would be misleading to suggest that there was an absence or lack of critical writing in the 1960s and '70s. Rather, the source of frustration on the part of artists seeking to escape the parochial confines of the established Academy tradition was the relative scarcity of a theoretically informed or sustained body of critical writing on both established and emergent practices. By way of comparison, US art criticism in the 1970s was in the ascendant. Building on an already established reputation for excellence in the field, the critical writing in journals such as *Artforum* (from the late 1960s onwards) demonstrates the almost meteoric rise of North American criticism in the mid-twentieth-century.

*Artforum*, followed by journals such as *October* (est. 1975) and the *New Art Examiner* (1973 – 2002), provided an unparalleled critical analysis of contemporary visual art in the period.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, British publications such as *Artscribe* and *Studio International* began to engage with contemporary cultural theory (both positively and negatively) in their assessment of visual art.<sup>63</sup> Along with the lively, incisive tone of the writing, these publications also paved the way for a progressive and serious response to new, 'non-traditional' and emerging genres/disciplines such as Performance Art, Film and Video Art and Conceptualism.

---

<sup>62</sup> *Artforum* was established in San Francisco in 1962. It moved to Los Angeles in 1965 and to New York in 1967. The move to New York heralded a shift in the style of work covered by the magazine. Broadly, the emphasis moved from a focus on Late Modernism to Minimalism and Conceptual Art. Amy Newman's *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962–1974* discusses the development and impact of *Artforum* during this period in detail.

<sup>63</sup> Along with the major US and UK publications to be established in the 1960s and '70s there were clearly other important international journals devoted to contemporary art and criticism which emerged in the period. A key example would be the Italian art magazine *Flash Art*, which was a significant publication for the development of contemporary art criticism, particularly in terms of attempting to counter the US bias of much international criticism. Founded in Milan in 1967 as a bilingual journal, it expanded and from 1978 was published in two editions – Italian (*Flash Art*) and English (*Flash Art International*). Like *Artforum*, *October*, *Art Monthly* et al., it is one of the few international art magazines to have survived to the present day.

In Scotland, part of the frustration over the 'state' of critical writing was not that the viewpoints and concerns expressed elsewhere were not held or acknowledged, but that there were too few dedicated publications in Scotland for the discussion of new developments and current debates to be played out. The relative absence of progressive art criticism was delineated even more sharply in contrast to the healthy literary scene, as I have discussed previously. The relationship between the production of engaged, self-reflexive and critically aware literature and its attendant criticism seemed inextricable. Questioning, discursive writing on new directions in literature was acknowledged as being an essential element in its development and growth in Scotland.

Unlike criticism on contemporary art, literature in Scotland had long been supported and challenged by its associated criticism – many new works of poetry and fiction were published alongside heavyweight, politicised literary criticism in publications such as *Blackwood's Magazine* (1817–1980) and the *Edinburgh Review* (1802–1929).<sup>64</sup> Set against this strong literary tradition, art criticism in Scotland, with very few exceptions, was either marginalised or ignored in favour of art historical writing which attempted to establish a lineage for a Scottish tradition.<sup>65</sup> And whilst the emergence of the literary Scots Renaissance, spearheaded by Hugh MacDiarmid, helped to re-establish a heavyweight, politically engaged mode of literary criticism in Scotland in the early twentieth century, art criticism simply had no equivalent, even in terms of a 'small press' devoted to such debates.

As the two 'scenes' – art and literature – began to converge and overlap in the 1960s it became ever more apparent that contemporary art was lagging behind its literary counterparts in terms of the critical debate needed to push it forwards. As I have discussed, figures such as Moffat believed strongly that in order for art to operate on the international level achieved by both Scottish literature itself and its influential critical voice, it was a necessity to follow the example set by literature. Apart from those figures regularly cited by Moffat, such as MacDiarmid, Edwin Morgan, Sorley MacLean, Sydney Goodsir Smith (who would later feature in his *Seven Poets* series of paintings) the 1960s saw the emergence of a

---

<sup>64</sup> Scotland's impact on publishing and literary criticism, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was profound. The historical significance of the *Edinburgh Review* in particular is compelling. It has been cited as being instrumental in transforming the practice of reviewing in Britain as well as playing a significant role in the development of the modern periodical and modern standards of literary criticism. As both a centre for publishing and a historical seat of the Enlightenment in the 1700s, Edinburgh was seen as an important location for literary and philosophical criticism.

<sup>65</sup> Journals such as the *Scottish Art Review*, published by the Glasgow Art Gallery and Museums Association throughout the period I consider, for example, rarely dealt with contemporary art, but considered art historical works and works from Glasgow public collections in some detail.

number of critically and commercially successful Scottish writers. Along with the publication of influential and infamous non-fiction books such as *The Divided Self* (1960) and *The Self and Others* (1961) by the radical Glaswegian psychiatrist R.D. Laing, both literary and popular Scottish post-war fiction was achieving international recognition. Along with the commercial success of popular and genre fiction such as Nigel Tranter's Westerns, Alasdair Maclean's war novels and thrillers and A.J. Cronin's *Dr. Finlay* novels (and their accompanying film and television adaptations), contemporary writers such as Muriel Spark, Archie Hind (winner of the Guardian First Book Award in 1966 for *The Dear Green Place*) and Gordon Williams (shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1969 for *From Scenes Like These*) continued to draw attention to Scotland as fertile ground for new writing. And though often based outside Scotland, Scots writers such as Tom McGrath and Alexander Trocchi were significant figures in international literary circles. First published in 1962, by 1965 McGrath was reading his poetry at the International Poetry Olympics in 1965 and was the founding editor of the counter-culture journal *International Times*. Trocchi, along with his late 1950s and early '60s novels such as *Young Adam* and *Cain's Book*, had edited the influential literary journal *Merlin* in Paris in the 1950s and established his revolutionary Project Sigma in the mid-1960s. Likewise, the almost immediate film and theatre adaptations of novels such as Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Williams's *The Siege of Trencher's Farm* (1969) (renamed *Straw Dogs* in the 1971 Sam Peckinpah film) further bolstered Scotland's literary reputation. This perhaps explains the alliance between visual art and literature in the 1960s. Along with the notion amongst some artists and writers that visual art and literature were complementary and inextricably linked, it would seem that a number of artists believed that by association and involvement art could participate in the debates surrounding cultural production which pervaded the literary scene. There was, of course, the literal overlap and crossover between art and literature in the period through new literary/art forms such as Concrete Poetry, along with a rise in the number of practitioners who identified themselves simultaneously as artist and writer – Ian Hamilton Finlay is a key example in this respect.

However, just as in the 1970s figures such as Demarco and Moffat had adopted approaches to the curation and exhibition of contemporary art which differed from the established conventions of the Scottish scene at the time, so the body of critical writing which flourished in the 1980s similarly sought new avenues and vehicles for commentary and criticism aside from mainstream journalism or the generic, populist review.



*Variant* was one of the first Scottish magazines in the twentieth century to have focused exclusively on contemporary visual art. From its inception in the early 1980s, everything about the magazine marked a new stage for approaches to art criticism in Scotland. Clearly, there were a number of journals, magazines and catalogues whose pages had dealt with new developments in art, discussed current exhibitions and attempted to offer critiques on the art of the period. And there were occasional, short-lived or one-off publications which similarly attempted to engage with contemporary art and its audiences.<sup>66</sup> However, along with the Edinburgh-based *Alba*, *Variant* was perhaps the first significant magazine published in Scotland to deal exclusively with contemporary visual art, aimed at a specialist, informed audience.

Alexander Moffat was a key player (both directly and indirectly) in the lives of both magazines. As I have suggested, one of the most important aspects of Moffat's writing career was not the development of a body of criticism written *by* him. Rather, Moffat's impact was in encouraging a critical approach to art amongst his students in the 1980s. Whereas in the 1970s Moffat's role as a curator (especially at the New 57 Gallery, between 1968 and 1978) was crucial in helping to establish a genuinely engaged and self-reflexive contemporary art 'scene' in Scotland, the 1980s saw his influence increase primarily through his role as an educator. Ken Currie and Malcolm Dickson, two of the most visible commentators on contemporary art in the 1980s, were both encouraged by Moffat to begin a writing practice alongside their studio practice in the Painting Department at Glasgow School of Art. Currie in particular cites Moffat as a major influence on his decision to start writing:

There was no critical writing going on whatsoever [when Currie was a student at Glasgow School of Art between 1978 and 1983] ... there was a very old-fashioned attitude, in the Painting School certainly, that you shouldn't write at all but Sandy encouraged writing because he wrote himself – in fact he is still a very articulate writer on art. The fact that Sandy wrote was very important

---

<sup>66</sup> Examples of one-off or short-lived magazines and journals include *Scottish Contemporary Art Review* published in the 1980s by the Edinburgh Contemporary Arts Trust and edited by Geraldine Prince; the *Scottish Review*, published in the late 1970s to 1980s by the Scottish Civic Trust and Saltire Society – the *Review* dealt mainly with literary subjects, with occasional pieces on visual art. Other journals included *Scottish Film*, incorporating *Scottish Film and Visual Arts* and *Common Sense* magazine, affiliated with the Department of Politics at Edinburgh University, which included articles by Murdo Macdonald on Marxist theory and Judith Squires on Feminism in the late 1980s. Similar literary journals carried occasional art reviews and essays, such as *the Scotia Review*, *Akros*, *Cenchratus* and the *Green Book*, but all were primarily literary journals. The *Scotia Review* in particular has credited *Rocket* as being the model and catalyst for establishing the *Review*.

because no-one else wrote. It was actually regarded as unforgivable [for an artist] to write about art – it was for critics (Currie, 2002).

Moffat's encouragement of writing amongst his students at Glasgow School of Art itself led to the huge increase in the number of artists who began writing on art in the 1980s. When one considers the evidence, there can be no doubt that Moffat's influence, along with figures such as Ray McKenzie and Peter Seddon (also lecturers at Glasgow School of Art from the 1970s onwards), played a significant role in the shift of artists' attitudes towards writing and generated an increase in the sheer number of artists who began to pursue a writing practice in the period.

Much of the writing to emerge in the early 1980s in Scotland can be seen to share characteristics with that published in a number of short-lived magazines originating in the 1960s, such as *Rocket*, *Gambit* and *Scottish International*. Along with the quantity and volume of writing itself, the outlets for writing also increased exponentially in the 1980s through initiatives such as the publishing arm of Glasgow's Third Eye Centre under Chris Carrell and the more ephemeral texts coming out of newly established artist-run spaces such as *Transmission* (1983) and *Collective* (1984). Though still limited, in comparison to the dearth of opportunities in the period leading up to the 1980s, would-be critics and writers were finally offered new, Scottish-based platforms for their writing. Just as artists and curators had adopted a self-determined approach to finding exhibition space in the 1960s and '70s, the 'DIY' ethos of creating opportunities rather than waiting for them found a foothold in the climate of Thatcher's Britain (1979-1990), spurred on by similar directions in music (for instance, the rise of independent music labels such as Factory Records, Rough Trade and Glasgow's Postcard Records). Again, this trajectory can be considered in relation to late nineteenth and twentieth-century art history (self-publishing, manifestos, artist's statements, etc.) but in a specifically British context the development of counter-cultural, samizdat literature can be seen clearly as a growing trend from the 1960s onwards. Along with the underground publishing ventures populated by figures such as Jim Haynes, Tom McGrath and John Calder in the '60s and '70s, a growing body of ephemeral texts and zines began to be circulated amongst networks of people who were otherwise marginalised or unrepresented by the mainstream media. Such publications were often influenced by punk and related subcultures through their aesthetic, philosophy and tone and though the majority of these publications were based broadly on coverage and discussion of music, artists also recognised the potential of the fanzine as a forum for discussion and expression unavailable elsewhere (i.e. through established or official channels).

The antagonistic and oppositional mode of publications such as *Rocket* and later manifestations of this voice of dissent and discontent in the pages of magazines like *Stigma* are almost indistinguishable in certain texts. *Stigma* was the direct precursor for one of Scotland's most long-standing visual art publications, *Variant*, established by students at Glasgow School of Art in 1984. The development of *Variant* from the rebellious Glasgow School of Art student magazine to a glossy journal of visual arts criticism is an interesting path to follow if one attempts to map the progression of criticism in the last three decades. Indeed, it could be said that *Variant's* progression through the 1980s and '90s offers a kind of microcosm through which to track the development of approaches to criticism in Scotland as a whole. It can also, perhaps, be seen as a way of identifying the way in which criticism in Scotland both reflected and responded to broader Anglophone critical shifts in the UK and US.

## **Stigma**

*Stigma* was established in 1982 by a group of students in the Fine Art Department at Glasgow School of Art. The magazine was published by the Students Representative Council and was written primarily by students who were active within student politics. According to Ken Currie (2002), *Stigma* had overtly political themes and was a forum for impassioned debates on a range of socio-political and cultural issues. According to Ken Currie, it was 'run almost entirely by anarchists, feminists and socialists' (Currie, 2002). Visual art was discussed in relation to these themes, with various representatives of the Women's Group, the Socialist Society (Neil Woodward), CND (Ian Brotherhood), the Gay Society (Russell McVean), Communism (Currie) and anarchism (Dickson) contributing to its pages. For many of its contributors *Stigma* was the first magazine to publish their writing. Malcolm Dickson, Ken Currie, Ian Brotherhood and William Clark have written extensively on visual art since their early beginnings in student publishing. Issue No. 3 from February 1983 included a short statement setting out *Stigma's* 'policy':

*STIGMA* is a Glasgow School of Art publication printed by GSA SRC. It has no editorial board. It is open to all views, news and reviews from all students or otherwise from outside our institution – unless in contravention of SRC policy on views of a sexist, racist or fascist nature. The scope in between is endless (*Stigma*, 1983, p.1).

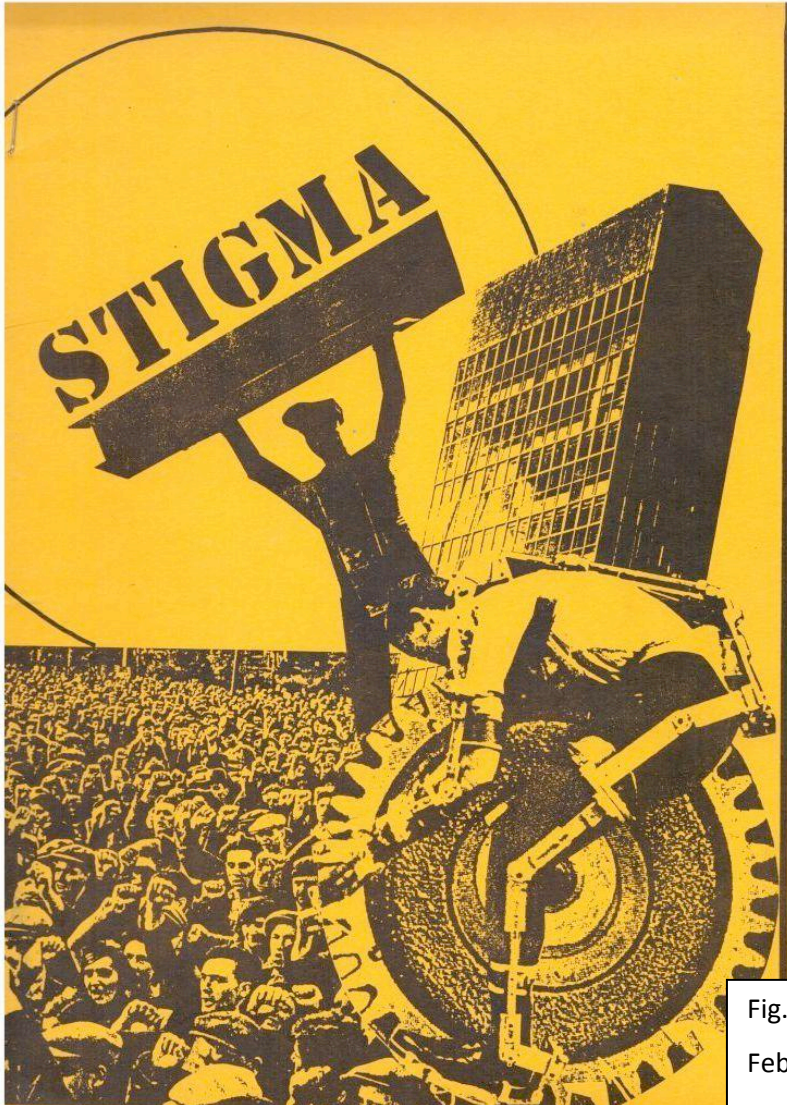


Fig.28 Cover of *Stigma* (Number 3, February 1983) [Photograph].

The cover, designed by Ken Currie, was reminiscent of Constructivist graphics, particularly Rodchenko's photo-montage of the early 1930s. The whole publication was low-budget and defiantly 'lo-fi' in terms of its aesthetic (stapled, black and white, photocopied) but the heavier card covers of the magazine seemed more carefully considered than the somewhat haphazard graphics peppered throughout the inside pages. Wrapping the spine and spilling across the bottom of the front cover were found images of a crowd scene, high-rise architecture and the outline of a flat-capped labourer holding an iron girder aloft to support the words *STIGMA*. Found images of individual workers on the back cover were shown with hands raised in a generic salute of political solidarity. Currie's design undoubtedly reflected his political bias and perhaps he intended that it might 'direct' the agenda which *Stigma* should adopt.

Along with the specific art historical and political references projected by the design, the cover was also very much 'of its time'. The revival of interest in photo-montage and 'machine aesthetic' imagery in 1980s youth culture ensured that *Stigma's* cover was in keeping with the graphic identity of the decade. In particular, Currie's design bore a clear relationship with 1980s agit-prop design (such as the work of Peter Kennard for CND).<sup>67</sup>

*Stigma*, though a short-lived student publication, is significant in terms of its encapsulation and succinct coverage of the issues which dominated (and continued to dominate) Scottish criticism in the early 1980s. In addition, *Stigma* perhaps represents a kind of transitional stage for Scottish art writing, marking the shift from the 'straight', didactic criticism seen in the 1960s and '70s to a much more playful, experimental mode of writing seen in its early stages in *Stigma* and more fully in *Variant*. Finally, some of the 'key players' in Scottish criticism in the 1980s first began writing within the pages of *Stigma*, and the kernels of the critical battles which ensued in the aftermath of the *New Image Glasgow* exhibition can clearly be seen.

In spite of the lack of an editorial board, and regardless of *Stigma's* claim that the publication was an open forum for anyone wishing to contribute their 'views, news and reviews', everything about the publication – from the cover to the contents list – indicated that this was a platform for politically engaged, working-class (or working-class identified) students who were broadly united by their Leftist political leanings. As such, *Stigma* could be seen to have loosely followed the tradition of Red Clydeside pamphleteers whose 'publication and dissemination of political literature [...] was seen as a vital part in the process of increasing class awareness amongst Scottish workers and an important medium for the transmission of socialist and Marxist ideas in the early decades of the twentieth century' (Byers, M & Mitchell, I. R., 2007).<sup>68</sup> The strategy of using examples from history as exemplars for current political

---

<sup>67</sup> While Currie became renowned for his figurative painting and association with New Image Painting, his emphasis on photography and filmmaking at this point in his career seems apposite in light of his staunch political views. Between 1983 and 1985 Currie worked as a filmmaker at Cranhill Arts Project in Glasgow and produced banners for trade unions and May Day celebrations.

<sup>68</sup> The number of publications associated with the Red Clydeside period is difficult to ascertain but examples include publications such as *The Commune*, the official publication of the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (APCF), an anarchist-communist group based in Glasgow and led by Guy Alred from 1921. *The Commune* 'stressed the need for self-organised working-class activity [and] direct action' in opposition to the parliamentary route to reform sought by other socialist groups. Other key publications included John Wheatley's *The Catholic Workingman* of 1909, John Bruce Glasier's 1915 pamphlet *The Peril of Conscription* (written in opposition to Britain's involvement in the First World War and the government's introduction of conscription) and *The Clyde Rent War* by P. J. Dollan, on the history of the Glasgow rent strikes of 1915-1916,

struggles bears a striking resemblance to Ken Currie's article on *Art and Social Commitment*, which I discuss further in this section. The awareness of Glasgow's political history would have been even more apparent in the 1980s because of the high-profile trade union activity surrounding the threat to shipbuilding on the Clyde in the early 1970s (and Currie in particular was closely involved with trade union activity in the mid-1980s). Activists such as the then Communist Party member and trade unionist Jimmy Reid became well-known public figures through media coverage of events such as the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Work-In in 1971- 2, just as John Maclean had become the public figurehead of Red Clydeside in the 1920s. In *Variant* issue 3, published in 1987, this interest in Glasgow's radical political history was again highlighted – the image across the back cover was a photograph of the raising of the Red Flag in George Square in Glasgow in 1919.

Apart from the indirect influence on publications such as *Stigma*, the parallels between some of the political ideals expressed in publications such as *The Commune* and their adoption by politically engaged artists in 1980s Scotland are evident, especially in terms of the increasing emphasis on self-organisation in the form of self-publishing and the founding of leftist artist-run groups and initiatives such as Transmission (established in 1983 by Glasgow School of Art graduates including many associated with *Stigma* and *Variant* such as Malcolm Dickson and Peter Thomson).<sup>69</sup> Along with these specifically Glaswegian precursors, *Stigma* could also be seen to have been part of the more recent manifestations of pamphleteering in the form of the subcultural zine network most visible from the '60s onwards. Because of their variety, there is no single definition of what a 'zine' actually is, but in broad terms zines have historically operated as not-for-profit publications often disseminated through a network of similar initiatives. They are often distributed by mail or via independent or 'alternative' bookshops, zine fairs, gigs, conferences or other events related to their specific subject matter. Zines tend to be low or no-budget, and are usually self-financed by an individual or small group. They are usually advertised via word of mouth or through other zines and usually have a relatively small circulation.

---

written in the 1920s as Glasgow's rent arrears were increasing. As well as providing an overview of the rent strikes, Dollan's pamphlet included proposals for housing reforms. For more on this see Byers, M & Mitchell, I. R. (2007).

<sup>69</sup> While there is clear evidence for a rise and increase in artist-run initiatives in the 1980s it would be misleading to suggest that such groups only emerged in this period. There are numerous examples of similar groups in Glasgow throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth century such as the J.D. Fergusson's New Art Club and New Scottish Group, Glasgow Artists Group, Unity Theatre, The Refugee Club and so on (see, for example, Normand, 2000; Oliver, 2001; Oliver, 2002; Wilson and Pilgrim, 2007).

Stephen Duncombe's 1997 book *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* provides a good overview of the genre, from 1930s science fiction fanzines to the infinite number and variety of political, art, religious, sport and music zines in circulation today.

One might well argue that all zines are fanzines. Simply, fanzines are publications devoted to discussing the intricacies and nuances of a cultural genre. [...] Defining themselves against a society predicated on consumption, zinesters privilege the ethic of DIY, do-it-yourself: make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you [...] Zines are speaking to and for an underground culture (Duncombe, 1997, pp.7-8).

Duncombe goes on to describe the zine ethos as a kind of 'vernacular radicalism' or 'an indigenous strain of utopian thought' which seemed to form a true culture of resistance and 'angry idealism' outside the 'sterility' of academia: 'Their way of seeing and doing was not borrowed from a book, nor was it carefully cross-referenced and cited.' These observations seem apposite when considering *Stigma* and early issues of *Variant*. Indeed, Duncombe's attempt to describe a 'typical' zine (acknowledging that 'typical' is a problematic term here) could easily stand in for a general description of *Stigma* and *Variant*:

A typical zine [...] might start with a highly personalized editorial, then move into a couple of opinionated essays or rants criticizing, describing, or extolling something or other, and then conclude with reviews of other zines, bands, books and so forth. Spread throughout this would be poems, a story, reprints from the mass press (some for informational value, others as ironic commentary), and a few hand-drawn illustrations or commix [sic]. The editor would produce the content him or herself, solicit it from personal friends or zine acquaintances, or less commonly, gather it through an open call for submissions. Material is also 'borrowed': pirated from other zines and mainstream press, sometimes without credit, often without permission [...] Zines are the most recent entry in a long line of media for the misbegotten, a tradition stretching back to Thomas Paine and other radical pamphleteers, up through the underground press of the 1960s (Duncombe, 1997, pp.14 and 19).

The more progressive areas of Scotland's art world also shared close associations with broader cultural shifts, particularly the alternative, independent, small press and counter-cultural literary

endeavors/initiatives of figures such as Tom McGrath<sup>70</sup>, John Calder<sup>71</sup>, Jim Haynes<sup>72</sup> and George Robertson,<sup>73</sup> as discussed in the previous chapter.

As I have outlined, there are numerous other connections to be made regarding the history of publishing in Scotland which helps place later ventures into context. Edinburgh's importance as a seat of the Enlightenment, the book culture it fostered and the publication of philosophical texts in the eighteenth century provide a fascinating backdrop to later developments, from the publication of critical texts in journals such *Scottish International* and the *New Saltire* in the 1960s to the links between Edinburgh's bookselling tradition and critical discourse in Jim Haynes's successful attempt to revive the ambience of eighteenth and nineteenth-century bookshops as places for artistic and literary discussion and debate in his Paperback Bookshop. Likewise, a reciprocity between publishers, booksellers and artists was long established in Edinburgh and Glasgow (Charles Rennie Mackintosh's close association with the publisher Walter Blackie is one such example). The historical significance of publications such as *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Edinburgh Review* to literary criticism also demonstrate the Scotland's importance as a centre of critical debate, particularly with regard to literature. This might also explain the desire on the part of artists (and the art world more generally) to be participants in this rich tradition of written debate and dissent. In terms of Glasgow, the well-established sense of civic identity on the part of its residents, especially the identification with class struggle, is also revealing in terms of the way publications such as *Stigma* and *Variant* developed. Clearly, many student magazines (or magazines which began within the context of higher education) similarly focused on broad-based radical left-wing politics but *Stigma's* character not only addresses these issues but considers them from a very specific Glasgow/West of Scotland perspective, and uses a particularly regional, vernacular identity in its exploration of the given themes (the use of Glasgow dialect, the reliance on a clearly identifiable brand

---

<sup>70</sup>Tom McGrath was renowned as a Scottish poet and playwright. After working as features editor for *Peace News* he became the founding editor of the counter-cultural *International Times* (IT) in 1966. McGrath was also instrumental in establishing Glasgow's Third Eye Centre (now the CCA) in 1974. He was director of the Third Eye between 1974 and 1977 and his influence undoubtedly fostered the multi- and interdisciplinary approach adopted by the Third Eye in the late 1970s in relation to performance, theatre, poetry and painting.

<sup>71</sup>John Calder is a Scots-Canadian writer and publisher who established Calder Books in 1949. Calder Books achieved a reputation for risk-taking and its commitment to free speech and for publishing 'controversial' literature by figures such as William Burroughs, Henry Miller and Hubert Selby Jnr. and for introducing foreign classics and experimental literature to a British audience.

<sup>72</sup>As noted previously, Jim Haynes was an important cultural figure in Edinburgh in the 1960s, through his Paperback Bookshop, his involvement with the Traverse Theatre and, in London, for being a co-founder of *International Times*.

<sup>73</sup>George Robertson helped with the Scottish distribution of *International Times* in the 1960s and was a prominent participant in Scottish counter-culture and publishing.



of Glasgow 'gallus' humour, the use of local references, etc.). There is certainly an awareness of Glasgow's history of political protest in the pages of *Stigma* (the parodic piece 'Red Betty's Bolshie Diary' is an example) and a sense of playing with the city's reputation as a 'hotbed' of politics which were often radically left-of-centre (in both UK and Scottish terms).<sup>74</sup>

To come back to a consideration of the specific content of *Stigma*, the contents list of Issue 2 (November 1982) is representative of the series as a whole. It included articles and features on topics such as CND, the Falklands War, the monarchy, NHS strikes, student grants and, notably, a long review of the exhibition *Contemporary Art from Scotland*, unambiguously titled 'The Dying Gasps of Bourgeois Art' by the painter Ken Currie, then a postgraduate student in the Department of Drawing and Painting. In a piece which bears a striking resemblance to Robert Crozier's lambasting of his former tutors in issues of *Rocket* in the early '60s (as discussed in the previous chapter), Currie goes a step further in his criticism of the work of David Donaldson, then Head of the Department of Drawing and Painting at Glasgow School of Art (and Currie's Head of School).<sup>75</sup> As Currie has noted, 'It was all very immature but there was some serious stuff in it' (Currie, 2002). If one were to compare the criticisms of Crozier and Alan Bold in the pages of *Rocket* to Currie's vituperative exhibition review in the pages of *Stigma* in 1982 it would seem that little had changed for painting in Scotland – the same basic argument is presented, the same issues are raised. Whilst it is clear that Currie sees himself as a socially engaged artist (both then and now), it is almost certainly the case that the viewpoints he expressed in *Stigma* were informed by Alexander Moffat's own position on the state of Scottish art (a state he attempted to 'remedy' through the work of Currie and the New Image group a year later, as I will discuss further in this chapter). Currie's approach in this particular article, however, proved rather too bombastic for Moffat's taste, as Currie has recalled:

---

<sup>74</sup> Glasgow's reputation for leftist politics became particularly evident in the so-called Red Clydeside period (1910 to 1932) in which existing socialist, Marxist and anarchist groups became part of a more organised infrastructure. A key figure in the period was the Glaswegian John Maclean. In this period Glasgow Marxist Albert Young also co-founded the Proletarian Schools, based on the principle of 'traditional Sunday schools but with the emphasis on the teachings of Marx and revolutionary socialism. At their peak of popularity in the early 1920s the schools had over 30 branches in cities and towns throughout Scotland and England' (Byers, M & Mitchell, I. R., 2007). The Schools also published their own literature, such as Young's *The Red Dawn* of 1915. In the period I discuss here, Glasgow was again associated with a left-of-centre political position through the creation of the Labour-dominated Strathclyde Region in 1973.

<sup>75</sup> In 1999 an excerpt from Currie's review was featured in a humorous book of Scottish 'curses and insults'. See Ross, D (ed.), (1999), *Awa' An' Bile Yer Heid!: Scottish Curses and Insults*, Birlinn Ltd, Edinburgh pp.3-4.

I gave the exhibition a total slagging and they [David Donaldson, Jimmy Robertson, Barbara Rae and Neil Dallas Brown] never forgave me. It was all my tutors. Sandy Moffat wasn't involved in it [the exhibition] fortunately but he was mortified by what I'd written [...] all that pompous tub-thumping stuff. Oh well, I was only twenty for god's sake (Currie, 2002).

Indeed, in the same issue Moffat himself contributed a short profile of Peter Seddon, championing Seddon's concentration on socio-political themes. That Currie chose to focus on Donaldson's work in particular – out of the forty artists represented in the exhibition - is telling in terms of the impact and furore Currie perhaps sought to create with this review: '[...] he is, in a sense, the 'top man' in Scottish Art, and therefore has the furthest to fall'. Wilhemena Barns-Graham's painting is dismissed as 'banal'; the 'pretentious' titles of most of the works are, in Currie's words, 'a telling expose of their breathtaking lack of content', and many would, according to Currie 'make nice Xmas cards – at least then they would have some sort of social function' (Currie, 1982, pp.6-8).

It is clear that Currie's review is representative of a particular brand of overtly politicised, 'angry' criticism which became increasingly prevalent in the early 1980s in Scotland and beyond. Yet it could be argued that, loosely, the renewed focus on the socio-political role of art had been reinvigorated by the 'spirit of '68'. In the UK, the emergence of the New Art History,<sup>76</sup> like many other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, had been largely influenced by developments in university departments of English Literature who had already had their own crisis and renewal from a historical to a critical discipline in the 1930s and '40s. English Literature adapted again to new theories and ideas in the early 1970s, and the division between reactionary professors and those who embraced left-wing ideas and theories influenced by the political and social events of the '60s, became stark (Terry Eagleton, Catherine Belsey, etc.). The 'shaking up' of the literary canon can be seen as a template for similar and parallel developments in other disciplines, many of whom borrowed from new literary theory to revise

---

<sup>76</sup> The term 'New Art History' was coined in the 1980s to refer to the increasing number of methodologies being applied to the history of art, such as feminist critique, gender-based approaches and social theories of art (as seen in the work of art historians such as T. J. Clark, Fred Orton, Michael Baxandall and Griselda Pollock and linked to universities such as Leeds, Middlesex and Birmingham). Used as an 'umbrella term' to encompass this range of approaches, some of these methodologies were obviously in place long before this so-called new direction was identified. The 'New Art History', then, rather than implying that radical new approaches had been formed in the 1980s, really worked to describe how these approaches or discourses could, together, be seen to have revolutionised the discipline of art history over a few decades, gathering speed from the 1970s onwards.

their own academic areas.<sup>77</sup> So the growing awareness of movements such as Situationism, the dissemination (and translation into English) of poststructuralist philosophy in France, the development of critical postmodernism in the US and the emergence of the New Art History and Cultural Studies/Visual Culture approaches in the UK throughout the late '70s and early '80s can all be seen to have had a growing influence on how and what was discussed within the art world (if only to dismiss such 'new wave' ideals). As the introduction to Rees and Borzello's 1986 book *The New Art History* noted: 'the new art history is the product of late-sixties tolerance for left-wing and continental ideas which has changed the nature of every academic subject over the last two decades' (Rees & Borzello, 1986, p.5). More broadly, then, the transition from (loosely) Modernist to Critical Postmodernist approaches across the 'creative industries' in the 1970s and '80s in academia can be seen to have informed writing outside academia as well as within it.<sup>78</sup> I will return to some of these developments later in this chapter.

Whether or not the young artists and writers commenting on art in Glasgow in the early 1980s were specifically aware of such developments is debatable, though from Issue 4 of *Variant*, postmodernism is a recurrent topic for debate. Whatever the awareness of these shifts, these writers were, however, still writing within this broader cultural framework and against this contextual backdrop. And even if the nuances of the academic developments described above had been ignored by these artist-writers, they were nevertheless familiar with some of the figures involved. John Berger, at least for Currie, was influential, as he had been for Moffat. Berger had been invited to speak at Glasgow School of Art in 1982 while Currie was a student and references to Berger's work can be found in at least one of his articles for

---

<sup>77</sup> One of the factors closely linked with the introduction of a more critical and theoretical approach to art history in the UK was the rapid expansion of university education in the '70s and '80s, encouraged by the government who wanted a skilled, professional workforce. This expansion led to a new demographic not only studying art history but teaching it as well. The changes in the recruitment of new staff across the humanities were reflected in Malcolm Bradbury's 1975 satirical novel *The History Man*. Crudely, the 'old boys clubs' of connoisseur art history departments in red-brick universities had competition from younger, more diverse staff teaching in the new universities and polytechnics (in Scotland, examples of such 'new' staff include Glasgow School of Art tutors Ray McKenzie and Peter Seddon). New universities such as the Open University (established 1969) quickly embraced (and perhaps pioneered) new art history approaches in their courses and publications. Along with the OU, the two most significant British departments to respond to such 'new' approaches to art history were Leeds and Middlesex. In 1975 Leeds University established an MA course in the social history of art and in 1979 Middlesex Polytechnic established the journal *Block*, which was a radical art and design history journal.

<sup>78</sup> Roland Barthes and Raymond Williams, for example, wrote extensively on broadly visual cultural topics (TV, fashion, advertising, etc.) for a 'public' audience in non-academic magazines, such as Barthes for *Playboy* and Williams for *The Listener*.

*Stigma*.<sup>79</sup> However, Currie's position, like that of Moffat, had less in common with 'the new art history' or burgeoning poststructuralist thought than with more established approaches to the social function of art in the tradition of nineteenth-century French Realism. Like Crozier, Bold and Moffat, Currie's philosophy of art was informed (with the exception of John Berger) by early to mid-twentieth-century Marxist figures such as Hauser and, in particular, Gramsci, as evidenced in their references, footnotes and quotes. As he has noted:

We were interested in the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's ideas – that artists and intellectuals had to work with people rather than lead them [...] we thought that artists had to become part of the working class and imbed themselves in the working class culturally. The strategy [in writing about art] was that we were trying to make art accessible and use art as a vehicle for people to express their political ideas. It was part of a political process as well as an artistic position (Currie, 2002).

This quote demonstrates the close relationship between Currie's and Moffat's understanding of the function and purpose of criticism. Certainly, the encroaching retreat into postmodern relativism seen in the art criticism of the 1990s in Scotland was nowhere to be seen in Currie's writing of the '80s. In this respect Currie's critical approach leaned towards the dogmatism characterised by the authoritative didacticism of much 'traditional' criticism.

According to Currie, speaking in 2002, this approach to criticism was crucial and highlights his awareness of the deliberate use of rhetoric and polemic in writing of this kind:

You construct a position, even if you might not necessarily believe absolutely in that position. If you've got a recognisable position you take up that position. It means you can actually map your way through the fog. A lot of people find that very uncomfortable. I'm still generally perceived as having this left-wing position because it was so forcibly articulated at the time, along with a number of other artists so I suppose it was a wee bit over the top (Currie, 2002).

---

<sup>79</sup> Berger's BBC television programme *Ways of Seeing* was broadcast in 1972 followed by a book based on the series. It can also be seen as representative of the shift from the didacticism of, for example, Kenneth Clarke's *Civilisation* to a more discursive, questioning approach to the history of art.

Currie's review, then, was as much (if not more) a case of establishing a political position on the part of the writer than it was about a close reading and interpretation of individual works of art. Whilst this has always been a tendency for certain types of criticism (particularly criticism tied to or representative of a particular political or aesthetic agenda) in the new wave of criticism in early '80s Scotland, the artwork itself was often in danger of being surplus to requirements rather than (even) being used as a tool to (sometimes very literally) illustrate a particular point.<sup>80</sup>

In *Stigma* No. 3 Neil Woodward, of the Art School's Socialist Society, wrote a lengthy text on the subject of unemployment. The article attempted to raise consciousness amongst art students of the impact of the Conservative Party's economic policies on the unemployment crisis facing the UK at the beginning of the 1980s. Initially, the link between politics and art in Woodward's discussion appear tenuous. However, like most of the texts in *Stigma*, the emphasis in the conclusion makes the connections between art and politics explicit. Unemployment was clearly considered to be the most likely outcome for students facing graduation in the early 1980s and it was a situation frequently discussed throughout *Stigma* with a depressing sense of inevitability. Like many articles written in the pursuit of a Socialist agenda (such as Moffat and Bellany's texts to accompany their open-air exhibition in the mid-'60s), the didacticism within the article comes with the assertion that it is crucial for artists to accept some level of moral and ethical responsibility:

It should be obvious now that we as students are bound, some of us at least, to come face to face with the very real problem of unemployment once we leave this art school. It is necessary to bear in mind that in our capitalist society, the role of an artist is seen at best as a threat to the status quo and at worst as a producer of pretty bric-a-brac for a wealthy elite [...] There can be no guarantees of full employment again but at least our chances of a worthwhile and socially useful occupation would be greatly increased (Woodward, 1983, pp.7-8).

Woodward's viewpoint makes evident the harsh economic and cultural realities within which these artists and writers were practising and contextualises the rise of self-organisation not just as a political stance against the establishment, but as a necessity in an era with very few opportunities for young

---

<sup>80</sup> In all forms of criticism, then and now, the avoidance of dealing with the art work on which the writing 'hinges' remains a trap for many critics and continues to be the focus in discussions of the relative 'criticality' of a given piece of writing. I will return to this issue more fully.

artists coming out of art schools. It is no coincidence, then, that the formation of many longstanding grassroots organisations (publications, gallery spaces, artist groups) in Scotland emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. (I will return to a discussion of such initiatives later in this chapter.) The pages following Woodward's article carried an even lengthier piece which expanded on some of the points raised in 'Unemployment'. Ken Currie's 'Art and Social Commitment' (Currie, 1983) dealt with the well-worn subject indicated by its title but attempted to highlight the relevance of the need for 'social commitment' in the context of Scotland in the 1980s. The sarcasm of the review in Issue 2 gives way in this text to a far darker cautionary tale warning artists that they 'can no longer detach themselves from these vitally important issues'. Currie presents a potted history of art which has had a clear social function in both literal and ideological terms. Whilst Currie's account may, in retrospect, seem dated or naïve in its expression of Socialist values (and the urging of young artists to aspire to make art which resists capitalism), at its heart Currie's basic arguments are still persuasive and timely. It would be too easy to dismiss such writing as the ramblings of a radical student for whilst we may not write of 'workers' and 'revolution' in the manner of Currie's text, much critical debate today still centres on closely related concerns such the commodity status of art in the context of globalisation, the role of art in social inclusion initiatives and so on. Nevertheless, whilst the core debates may still have currency, the tone, language and general expression of these ideas in Currie's writing are very much of their time. Consciously or not, Currie's text indirectly references a range of philosophical concepts which were circulating in the late '70s and early '80s (e.g. Althusser's notion of ISAs, Foucault's 'power-knowledge' and Bourdieu's understanding of *habitus*). His endnote references, like those of Crozier, Moffat and Bold in the 1960s, cite John Berger and Ernst Fischer as well as writings by Fernand Léger and David Siqueiros (the Mexican Muralists, Siqueiros, Orozco and Rivera, and their Marxist politics were to prove an enduring influence on Currie's own work and his approach to 'political art'). So, whilst the essential principles of Currie's text may have longevity in terms of contemporary concerns, Currie's manifesto-like calls for change and his proposals for what these changes might entail (in short, artists – working as public servants – would operate within a system based on similar historical models such as Constructivism, Mexican Muralism and the USA's WPA programme) seem painfully gauche with hindsight (an opinion, it should be noted, that was shared by Currie himself in a 2002 interview).<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> One of Currie's early texts was written for *Scottish Marxist* magazine. The piece centred on the work of a fellow student who

The central part of the article deals specifically with these ideas in relation to artists and students working in Glasgow. Tellingly, Currie writes pointedly of the international impact of New Image painting and the renewed critical focus on avant-garde figurative painting. One of the most salient points he makes comes in a discussion of art world 'centres':

It is an arrogance to suggest that the international art scene revolving around New York, London and Paris is the only important one in the world and that art scenes elsewhere are merely 'provincial' and not worth bothering about [...] Now it seems that Glasgow is slowly beginning to emerge as a centre of artistic interest (Currie, 1983, p13).

Currie continues by claiming that, while Glasgow may be emerging as a centre of artistic interest, the current situation 'is dominated by artists with exclusively bourgeois interests and outlooks. They maintain a firm hold on the art scene here, exploiting it for their own self-interest.' Like Crozier twenty years before, Currie bemoans the 'stranglehold' such bourgeois interests have on Glasgow, and criticises artists and institutions such as Glasgow School of Art for their lack of engagement with the critical social issues surrounding them, claiming that this detachment 'is an unhealthy tradition that has been rigorously maintained in the Glasgow School of Art.' Currie's view, however, is more optimistic than Crozier's, suggesting that at least some level of change has occurred:

[...] for the last year or so the situation has gradually begun to change. There is a growing number of artists in Glasgow who are dealing directly with social and political issues in their work and attempting to address it to a wider audience [...] Some are attempting to set up a gallery in the East End that will be run and organized by artists themselves and committed to exhibiting the work of young, radical artists (Currie, 1983, p13).

An interesting aspect of Currie's text is also the sense that battle lines were beginning to be drawn between 'traditional' leftists such as Moffat, Currie and co. and anarchists such as Malcolm Dickson and William Clark. These divisions would permeate the critical debates which ensued in the pages of *Variant* and the *Edinburgh Review* in the mid-1980s, but Currie has acknowledged that the political antagonism between Dickson and Clark and himself stemmed from student days and writing for *Stigma*:

---

had been a shipyard worker (and had participated in some of the major strikes and 'work-ins' of the 1970s). Currie attempted in the article to explore the notion of the working-class artist (Currie, 2002).

The people involved in *Stigma* went on to make *Variant* – Malcolm Dickson and William Clark. We had some big arguments because they were anarchists and I was a communist – it was like the Spanish Civil War all over again (Currie, 2002).

Currie ended his article with a quote by George Grosz which seems to strike a blow at both the bourgeois attitudes of the art school tutors and established artists in Glasgow as well as sniping at his peers who identified themselves with anarchism rather than Socialism in their anti-capitalist stance.

Dickson was perhaps the main target Currie had in mind in his expression of exasperation with anarchism. Whilst there were many other contributors to *Stigma*, Currie and Dickson are notably the most prolific and the most vociferous in their discussions. But both Dickson's style and his approach are at odds with Currie's very earnest Socialist 'call to arms'. Whilst Currie's writing may have been 'of its time' in terms of the way he articulated his beliefs, Dickson's writing heralded a new, energetic approach to critical writing in Scotland. Appropriately, Dickson's style seems very much an appropriation of similar writing in music journalism and zine culture (on which many anarchist networks of the period relied). Rather than invoking exemplars from early twentieth-century art history, or citing established Marxist texts as did Currie, Dickson's frame of reference is resolutely rooted in an understanding of sub and counter-cultural groups. And rather than identifying with a canon of socially committed artists, Dickson's cultural position within *Stigma* is that of a post-punk anarchist, a loosely defined network often linked to the rise of independent, non-commercial music initiatives. Disillusioned with the way in which the idealism of '60s and '70s counter-culture became subsumed into the mainstream, a loosely defined anarchist stance became a viable option for young people who held radical leftist concerns but could see the failures of state-run Communist and Socialist systems.

Dickson's article in Issue 2, 'Psychedelia Revisited', discusses some of these points, citing the newly launched Channel 4's documentary on Woodstock as an example of how 'hippie entrepreneurs' had sold out; that what had begun as a genuinely counter-cultural movement had become 'about getting as high as you could within the American Dream, without any great commitment to altering that nightmare – mute acceptance and escapism' (Dickson, 1982a, p.3). Whilst this tirade against the broken idealism of the hippie movement might seem irrelevant in the context of art writing in Scotland, the article sets out key arguments which would become recurring themes for Dickson (and which are frequently discussed today in terms of the potential for culture jamming strategies). The article also reveals Dickson's



awareness and knowledge of British and European counter-cultural movements from the 1960s onwards (the student uprisings of Paris '68 and the *Oz* obscenity trials are specifically mentioned, for example). Along with the presentation of a particular stance (accompanied by numerous appropriated and reworked cartoons, slogans, etc.), Dickson's article was also notable in its use of a less than traditional mode of critical writing. In many respects, Dickson's style of writing bears a closer relationship with developments in music journalism (and the informal tone of zine writing) than with any contemporaneous art criticism. Like Currie's writing, Dickson's writing style can also be considered in a broader cultural context. Along with direct precursors in the form of zines and the underground press of the 1960s and '70s, parallels can also be drawn between the irreverent mode and style of Dickson's texts and the New Journalism which emerged in the US in the 1960s and '70s. Spearheaded by Tom Wolfe, the New Journalism developed as an alternative, or specifically, a more creative, form of journalism than 'straight' news reporting.<sup>82</sup>The New Journalists included Norman Mailer (whose essay 'The Faith of Graffiti' championed New York subway graffiti at a time when it was vilified in the press), Truman Capote (whose non-fiction account of a murder *In Cold Blood* in the style of a novel became seminal for the genre), Hunter S Thompson and P. J. O'Rourke. Wolfe in particular demonstrated an interest in art and visual culture, with the publication of the 'new journalistic' responses to Modernism in painting and architecture (*The Painted Word* in 1975, *From Bauhaus to Our House*, 1981). An extension of New Journalism – gonzo journalism – was pioneered by Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Consciously or not, it is to gonzo journalism that Dickson's text is most indebted. From the mid-1970s and into the 1980s music journalism in Britain was becoming increasingly experimental in its mode of reportage and criticism. The influence of gonzo journalism, for example, was clearly evident in the pages of the *New Musical Express* (NME) and *Melody Maker* in the period and such publications were cited in early copies of *Stigma's* successor, *Variant*. In the style of gonzo's preference for first-person narrative style and use of conversational speech, Dickson's text is peppered with swearing, jokes and direct, conversational 'asides' to the reader. Through the use of such gonzo-esque delivery, Dickson also stood in opposition to the veneer of neutrality projected by conventional journalistic and critical modes as well as avoiding the formulaic, often prosaic style reserved for discussion of 'serious' subjects such as art and culture.

---

<sup>82</sup> In 1973 Wolfe published a collection of journalism called *The New Journalism* which included writing by Wolfe himself, Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, P. J. O'Rourke and Norman Mailer.

Where Currie's writing was delivered in a rather paternalistic, didactic manner, Dickson's text seemed to assume that the readers of his text were already *au fait* with the sentiments he expressed. Like much of the art writing which followed throughout the 1980s – especially writing written by artists for artists – Dickson's style was irreverent, informal and addressed to his peers. Though clearly angered by the apathy of the so-called underground movements who were deemed to have 'sold out', Dickson avoids the dogmatic tone of some of Currie's writing. There is less a sense of an attempt to persuade or 'win over' the reader to a particular point of view in Dickson's text than in Currie's. Rather (again in the manner of zine writing) Dickson's style seems to assume that his readership would be 'on the same wavelength'. Both styles, however, could be seen to be in danger of alienating their readership – where Dickson perhaps leans too far into humour and risks undermining his 'message', Currie's texts can be altogether too dry and earnest, lacking the youthful, energised tone of Dickson's prose. In the same issue, Dickson's article 'Adventures Up Shit Creek' rails against the politics of the Falklands War. Dickson applies an almost semiotic reading of propaganda to dissect the way in which both Argentina and Britain had carefully used language in their struggle to sway public opinion. Dickson used his anger at the excuses put forward to justify an indefensible war to illuminate and foreground broader issues of power and control and the individual's relationship with the state. Dickson's scepticism of the mass media is writ large across the article and in many ways this mistrust prefigures his reaction to (what he saw as) the construction and promotion of New Image painting in Glasgow. Dickson's critical approach, both in *Stigma* and in his writing since then, is less concerned with the promotion of a particular political or aesthetic agenda than with the adoption of a questioning, discursive response to culture: 'The least we can do is be unrelentingly critical of the garbage they throw at us every day, from the glamour of advertising to the concoction of world events (as reported by the media)' (Dickson, 1982b, p.17).

'The Slop of the New', in *Stigma* Issue 3, highlights Dickson's interest in the Situationist notion of Spectacle, which he raises in a discussion of the emptiness of life under capitalism (Dickson, 1983a). Quoting performance artist Stuart Brisley's article in *Art Monthly* (and at the same time demonstrating his awareness of contemporary art magazines), Dickson succinctly responds to Currie's calls for socially committed art and the idea of dissolving the barriers between art and life:

As material circumstances and social divisions have hardened in the late '70s, resulting in the former in a more unequal distribution of wealth and in the latter in a more rigid social structure,

utopian notions of generating actual change through the intrusion of art into life became inappropriate, and probably absurd (Brisley in Dickson, 1983a).

Dickson follows this quote by claiming that under these conditions 'art can only survive in two ways: by stealth, or by submitting (eagerly of course) to those servants of capitalism – the galleries and museums.' Dickson's interest in underground and anti-establishment movements, and his ongoing commitment to self-organisation clearly demonstrate the attempts to help art survive 'by stealth'. Further in the text Dickson cites Ralph Rumney, which again indicates his sympathy with the goals of Situationism, particularly with regard to the role and function of contemporary visual art (i.e. that the avant-garde is destined to be co-opted by the academy). Dickson's mistrust of museums and galleries at this early stage are also significant in terms of the later developments in his career and his involvement in alternative gallery organisations such as Transmission. The theme is revisited in a further piece on 'The Arts Council and the State' (Dickson, 1983b). (Issues surrounding funding, state control of the arts and social responsibility would feature recurrently in *Variant*.)

## Variant

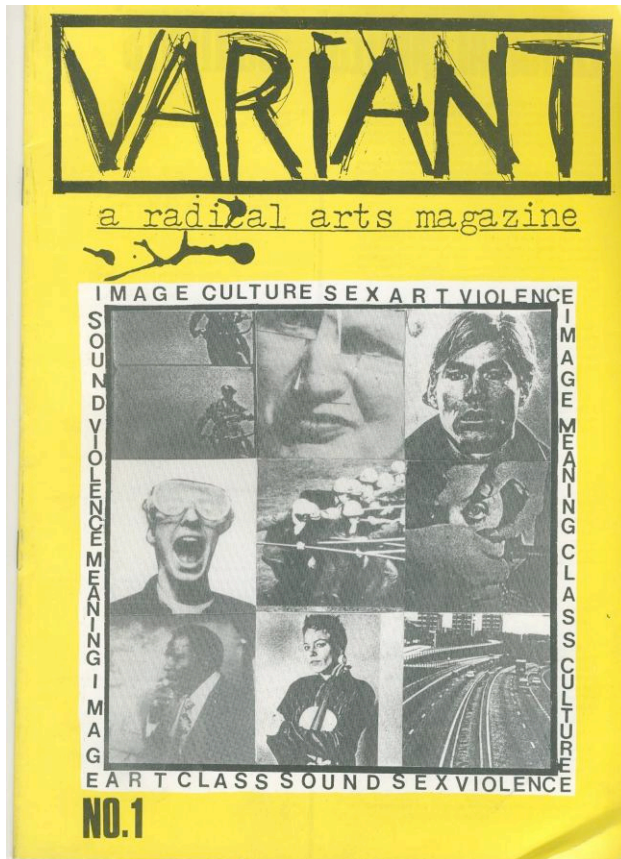


Fig.29 Cover of *Variant*, Number 1, 1984 [Photograph]

The opportunities for expression and debate offered by *Stigma* undoubtedly led to Dickson's decision to establish *Variant* in 1984, which was initially supported by the Students Representative Council at Glasgow School of Art.<sup>83</sup>

*Variant* emerged whilst its founder, Dickson, was still a student, and the crossover in theme, content and chronology between *Stigma* and *Variant* are very apparent. Essentially, *Variant* became the graduate off-shoot of *Stigma*. Again, Alexander Moffat was a pivotal figure in fostering an interest in writing and publishing amongst his students. In relation to *Variant* in particular, Moffat has claimed that he played a part in Dickson's decision to start the magazine whilst still a student in the Department of

---

<sup>83</sup> While *Variant* is still published today, this chapter considers the magazine's beginnings and its development throughout the 1980s under the direction of Malcolm Dickson. The magazine ceased publication in 1994 before being reissued in a new format and under new editors in 1996. *Variant* Volume 2 is edited by Glasgow School of Art graduate Leigh French. Initially, French was co-editor with former *Stigma* and *Variant* Volume 1 contributor William Clark.

Drawing and Painting in 1984. As Moffat has recalled: '*Variant* is all my fault I'm afraid – I gave Malcolm copies of *Rocket* and encouraged him to start a magazine – we used to call it *Deviant*' (Moffat, 2002).

For his part, Dickson has cited the lack of critical debate elsewhere as a major impetus in starting *Variant*:

The first issue came out in 1984 when I was in the final year in the Painting Department and there was a group of people in the Department who got together and were fairly dissatisfied with the level of critical debate within the arts – there wasn't any – and, I suppose, we were dissatisfied as well with the teaching on offer to the Painting Department at the time (Dickson, 2002).

From this account, Dickson's claim that *Variant* sought to fill a gap left by the teaching provision in the Painting Department suggests that while Moffat's encouragement may have acted as an important example (in terms of his support of artists' writing activity), the specific debates and issues which were of such importance to Moffat (namely, the role and function of figurative painting) were not shared by all of his students. So whilst Moffat's particular interests were clearly shared by artists such as Ken Currie, (as his writing in *Stigma* demonstrates), Dickson and his peers had a different set of interests and priorities. The issues and debates which were of importance to Dickson and his fellow *Variant* founders were informed by broader counter-cultural shifts, particularly the activities of radical political networks, and these interests were reflected in both the style and content of early issues of *Variant*. Over ten years *Variant* evolved from a low-budget, black-and-white publication into a glossy, full-colour 'art magazine'. The dominant impression in early issues, though, was that of a series of manifestos or a revolutionary tract, from content to design, which was, as Alexander Moffat recalls, 'a pre-Xerox wet copy where you had to wait for the ink to dry before resuming printing' (Moffat, 2002). The magazine's subtitle, 'A Radical Arts Magazine', along with its cover design, more than hinted at its content. Other subtitles and slogans included 'All That's Progressive' and 'Art and Ideas', whilst the word 'Kulturkrit' was emblazoned across the base. Although in the mid-1980s *Variant* was undoubtedly a very low-budget publication, the design of the magazine was not linked purely to economic factors. The punk 'cut n paste' aesthetic of early issues and the use of assembled, Jamie Reid-style typography in issues 1 and 2 indicated *Variant*'s sympathy with a DIY 'anti-professionalism' ethos common to leftist, politically engaged artists and designers of the time.

In Issue No.1, in a piece entitled 'Hopes and Fears (the nearest thing you'll find to an editorial statement in this magazine)', Dickson set out *Variant's* objectives:

It goes without saying that a critique of art is vital, but as long as it remains within the boundaries of art then it is useless and collaboratory. Hopefully this magazine will provide a platform for a positive critique of cultural product and ideas, from painting to film, sub-cultural activity to the politics of the society of consumption, and lots more besides (Dickson, 1984, p.2).

While *Rocket* may have proved an inspiration for Dickson to establish *Variant* in terms of direct examples of critical writing by Scottish artists (and, as noted earlier, Moffat has claimed that *Rocket* was a definite and direct influence on Dickson's decision to start his own magazine), he was undoubtedly aware of more recent magazines with a similarly 'radical' agenda. One of these was the Glasgow-based anarchist magazine *Here and Now*, edited by Keith Millar. According to Dickson, the group who established *Variant* 'were quite influenced by circumstances external to fine art education', specifically the 'activity around anarchist groups'. Certainly, when several figures associated with *Variant* became committee members of the newly established artist-run Transmission Committee for the Visual Arts, *Here and Now* used the gallery space as their mailing address. Likewise, a full-page review of *Here and Now* by Dickson appeared in *Variant* Issue 2. Many Transmission exhibitions and *Variant* articles of the early to mid-1980s similarly reflected the pro-/post-Situationist ethos of *Here and Now*. Transmission itself was also very closely related to *Variant* in terms of personnel and programming. An advert for Transmission appeared in the first issue of *Variant* in 1984 and throughout the 1980s there would be a close and ongoing relationship between the publication and the artist-run space. Of the eight figures involved in establishing the first issue of *Variant*, five (Simon Brown, Malcolm Dickson, William Clark, Gordon Muir and Peter Thomson) would go on to become Transmission Committee members in the mid 1980s (Dickson between 1985 and 1987).

If *Here and Now* may have reflected the underlying political philosophy of *Variant*, in terms of art publications, Dickson has claimed that contemporary Canadian art magazines proved influential on early issues of *Variant*:

Some art magazines from Canada had an effect on what we were trying to do because they were related to the kind of artist's space movement, so it was more to do with a kind of self-determination I think. That's why the Canadian magazines were of interest – they were part of a

seemingly independent culture [...] *High Performance* in the States was another good magazine (Dickson, 2002).

Along with these, the art and culture magazine *ZG*, edited by Rosetta Brooks, was a significant exemplar. *ZG* articles were quoted frequently in *Variant*, from Issue 1 onwards, and the magazine was cited by Dickson as an important art magazine of the period and an influence on his own approach with *Variant*. *ZG*'s Mission Statement highlights the similarities between *ZG* magazine and *Variant* in terms of aims and objectives:

*ZG* magazine identified an urgent necessity in the very particular moment of its appearance – the Reagan years, the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, the post-punk years, the Wall Street boom – and responded to it. [...] *ZG* paused, repeated and above all reframed the culture of power, but with text. By taking the objects of its analyses from high and low culture, popular and elite, it exposed the singular formal language, a sinister incantation, in which a Madonna concert and an art exhibition spoke their very different content (*ZG*, 2010).

As this quote demonstrates, like *Variant*, *ZG* aimed to both reflect and analyse culture with a particular emphasis on exposing and revealing 'the machinery of power'. In an exhibition text written by Dickson in 1985 (discussed later), *ZG* is again quoted. Similarly, a review of the exhibition *War of Images*, held at Transmission in 1986, was described as 'ZG-ish' (Anon, 1986 in: Stephenson and McLauchlan, 2001, p.17).

While cassette culture, mail art, radical magazine networks and the rise of artist-run initiatives visibly demonstrated the growth of post-punk 'DIY' culture in early 1980s Britain<sup>84</sup>, Situationism proved to be a hugely significant intellectual and theoretical framework for a large number of these loosely defined and affiliated groups and individuals. *Variant* was no exception, as Dickson has noted:

The biggest influence of all were the Situationists – they eclipsed all else and within the whole milieu of Situationism there was such a diverse range of writings and the post-Situationist scene on Britain was quite active at the time. There was a lot happening – magazines influenced me a great deal. I did my fourth-year dissertation on the Situationists. At that time they were

---

<sup>84</sup> For a summary of these activities, see the article 'C30, C60, C90, Go!', *Frieze*, Issue 78, Oct 2003. [Online] Available at: [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/c30\\_c60\\_c90\\_go/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/c30_c60_c90_go/) (Accessed 1.7.10)

relatively unknown within academia and I think that was the beginning of the period of absorption for them into culture, into the arts. That comes through all the early issues right up until the mid period of *Variant*. There were issues directly to do with the Situationist lineage (Dickson, 2002).

The first issue of *Variant* was supported by contributions from academics such as Ray McKenzie (an art historian and lecturer in the Liberal Studies Department at Glasgow School of Art) and Peter Seddon (a painter who taught alongside McKenzie in Liberal Studies), yet the majority of writing was by an editorial team largely made up of former *Stigma* contributors, such as Ian Brotherhood, Peter Thomson, William Clark and Malcolm Dickson.

The tone of *Variant*, from the beginning to the end of Issue 1, was bombastic, challenging and oppositional – perhaps linked to Dickson’s interest in Situationist writings (references to Guy Debord abound throughout Issue 1). As Dickson has admitted, ‘the first two [issues of *Variant*] were kind of one-offs I think, and more to do with stirring up – it was just a way of kicking back against the mediocre art scene at the time’ (Dickson, 2002). In terms of the division between Moffat and the writers linked to *Variant*, the very first article in *Variant*, ‘Hopes and Fears’, explicitly outlines Dickson’s position with regard to the ‘New Painting’:

Cultural activity is once again in a no-go period. For example, in art, the diversity and experimentation of late 60s/70s art product would appear (on the face of it) to be taking a back seat as cuts in the arts prevail coupled with the commercial bally-hoo of New Figurative painting (Dickson, 1984, p.1).

As a student, Dickson had studied alongside the Glasgow New Image painters such as Steven Campbell but had little interest in their subject matter or approach. His interest in new media (primarily video and time-based work) served to alienate him from the prevailing ethos of the Department, spearheaded by Moffat and his so-called protégés. Dickson’s interests, and those of his fellow *Variant* founders, were largely ignored by the tutors in their Department, though Dickson admits that whilst he felt that the teaching in the Painting Department was ‘quite poor’, ‘it was probably the wrong department for that group of students to be in. Most of them were still painters themselves but it was that link back to “the great tradition” that they didn’t have any affinity with. I think that’s what it was about at the beginning – trying to create a space for something else to happen.’ Not only was the New Painting dominant at



Glasgow School of Art, its key proponents (Currie, Wiszniewski, Peter Howson and Stephen Barclay) were also involved in some of the first exhibitions at Transmission, such as *Winning Hearts and Minds* in March 1984. Transmission's involvement with this kind of painting changed abruptly when the second Committee (which included Dickson, Muir, Thomson and Brown) took over the running of the space. Their frustration with the status quo within their art school again reveals the critical catalyst which finally gave rise to *Variant* (just as *Rocket* had reacted to the Painting Department at Edinburgh College of Art in the 1960s). A major cause for concern for Dickson and his peers was that for all the discussion of painting, there was a distinct lack of discussion of any other art form in Scotland. This situation was seen as anachronistic and reactionary for Dickson, who believed firmly in the legacy of the 1960s 'broadening out in the arts to a wide tapping of cultural material as a whole: feminist art, video, film, performance, text and photography.' This comment is very significant in thinking about *Variant's* contribution to criticism and contemporary art discourse in Scotland.

Central to *Variant's* editorial approach, from this early issue until its closure in the early 1990s, was its commitment to 'an intermingling of the arts'. In particular, led by Dickson, it sought to represent and discuss new media forms of art – a preference for video, photography and performance is abundantly evident throughout each issue.

Whilst the context and motivation for Dickson's interest in multi- and interdisciplinary merging and crossovers within the arts might have been at odds with that of Oliver, Demarco and Moffat in terms of his political perspective, his commitment nonetheless to 'the arts' as a whole (rather than as distinct and separate disciplines) can be seen as broadly related to the approach of artist-writers in Scotland since the early 1960s in terms of their insistence on a consideration of 'the arts' as a whole, and their determination to approach visual art as one facet of compatible and complementary expression of culture across different artistic fields. As if to emphasise this, the 'Hopes and Fears' piece was accompanied by images including photographs of the Living Theatre, Joseph Beuys, an Yves Klein performance, the band Einsturzende Neubaten at the ICA, and a still from the 1963 Jack Smith film *Flaming Creatures*. The DIY ethos so prevalent to this group of artist-writers is also quickly apparent in the text as Dickson applauds the 'vital and effective' efforts of independent record labels such as Rough Trade and Factory but bemoans the demise of 'a sub-culture of opposition' which has led to the 'mind-grinding banality' of popular music in the charts, the 're-invention of stardom' in the arts and music and the 'discrepancies between what happens in the official art world and everyday experiences of people'.

Amongst the numerous statements on contemporary culture, class-based conflict and art education, Dickson's comments on the state of Scottish culture seem like the reconfigured expressions of discontent of artist-writers such as Robert Crozier, Cordelia Oliver, Richard Demarco and Alexander Moffat in the 1960s and 1970s. This time, however, it is Moffat et al. who, for Dickson and company, have become the figureheads of the laissez-faire Scottish art establishment, to be railed against. Whilst Dickson does not mention Moffat by name, Fergus More, in an article entitled '*Scottish Art Now and Cultural Guerillas*', discusses the 'storm' created by the critic Waldemar Januszczack's review of the 1982 SAC exhibition *Scottish Art Now*, and names Moffat as one of the SAC Committee Members to have invited selectors to choose what Januszczack described as 'an unpleasant reminder of the successful cultural colonisation of Scotland's Art Colleges in the late Sixties and early Seventies by a dull international aesthetic'. The art historian, Duncan Macmillan, writer of the catalogue introduction for *Scottish Art Now*, was also singled out for criticism by Januszczack and, by extension, Fergus More, who wholeheartedly supported Januszczack's observations, noting that 'In a society where art criticism just doesn't exist Januszczack's words caused serious tremors' (More, 1984, p.11). *Variant's* focus, then, seemed to be on providing the very critique they identified as being absent in Scotland. Another article, 'The Permanent Curfew of Time and Space' by Ian Brown, similarly noted that *Variant* 'hopes to hear from those working on the margins and attempting to work outside the current mainstream situation' (Brown, 1984, p.10). For *Variant*, and the artists on Transmission's committee, the New Painting represented 'the current mainstream situation in Scotland', a feeling reiterated by Dickson:

When I joined the gallery in 85, morale was low [...] Perhaps expectations were too high, inevitably resulting in a feeling of disillusionment. Breadth and ambition at the beginning can help avoid such a situation, but the individuals felt seduced and abandoned – mollycoddled at first by the cautious parents of the Glasgow art scene, they were quickly dropped and ignored when 'New Image Glasgow' occurred at the Third Eye Centre. [...] New Image was the dawning of a new era, introducing a form of media 'consensual validation' that, if they claimed a 'new renaissance' was upon us and no viewpoints were allowed to debate otherwise, then it must be true (Dickson, 1996, in Stephenson and McLaughlan, 2001, p.13).

In terms of the division between the younger artist-writers of the early 1980s and their predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s, it is ironic (and paradoxical) to consider that whilst Moffat in particular had striven for years to foster a climate of critical debate and discussion on contemporary art in Scotland, it was his

(and his colleagues') lack of interest in developments outside figurative painting in the early 1980s that inadvertently led to the emergence of *Variant*. Whilst *Variant* may often have focused on subjects and debates outside his realm of experience or interest, the existence of the magazine nevertheless fulfilled Moffat's ambition for his students, and for young Scots artists generally, to question, challenge, write and discuss the 'burning issues' of the day – to develop a discourse around contemporary art in Scotland. What he did not know, at this point, was that his own work as a curator and critic would become the central focus of this opposition over the next few years in the pages of *Variant* and the *Edinburgh Review*.

Along with Dickson's opening statements in *Variant* Issue 1 was an article by Ian Brotherhood on the subject of art criticism. The central argument in 'The Undergrowth of Criticism' was a call for clarity of expression within criticism and a damning indictment of 'conjecture' on the part of the reviewer of art. Brotherhood wrote of critics who, in 'trying to reconciled (sic) his own wishes for the treatment of the subject with the actual results seen in the work', tend to speculate on the aims of the artist. Whilst Brotherhood makes some pertinent points in his text, his understanding of criticism was oversimplified in parts:

This all too frequent speculation is really just another form of that element which has been so instrumental in the construction and perpetuation of Modernism – conjecture (Brotherhood, 1984, p.4).

To assume that conjecture and speculation – especially in terms of Modernist criticism in the mid-twentieth century – arose from critics attempting to marry their opinion of the work with 'the artist's aims' ignores a huge body of formalist criticism which judges or reflects upon the work as an autonomous object, often at the expense of a consideration of the artists critical intentions. Brotherhood's rather sweeping statements on how criticism operates similarly sidestep the poststructuralist theories surrounding issues of authorship which were very much 'in the ether' in the early '80s in Britain. Nevertheless, many of Brotherhood's key points are of interest and echo similar opinions on criticism espoused by Alexander Moffat. Brotherhood, like Moffat, cites Gombrich's work as an example of the kind of clear-sighted, honest and 'straightforward' art writing to which critics should aspire. Harold Rosenberg, on the other hand, is deemed one of those critics who trade in 'mystical

obscurities' as part of a manipulative art market designed to 'arouse feelings of bewilderment and confusion'.

Those who have abused their literary abilities, those masters of verbosity who will always use fifteen words in place of five, those who would purposely give Art an importance it neither needs nor deserves should heed well the words of Goethe. They prove a most important point; that simple, honest writing has never fallen prey to the vagaries of fashion in the shameful way that Art has. Only the vigilance of editors and the writers themselves can ensure that it never does to the same appalling extent (Brotherhood, 1984, p.4).

In spite of its limitations, the core of Brotherhood's article encapsulates one of the ongoing dilemmas for critics and readers of criticism and art writing – the issue of style in art writing, of divisions between form and content. Like many articles in *Variant*, however, Brotherhood's concern with this subject seems prophetic in raising issues which would continue to dominate the art scene in Scotland and beyond.

The second issue of *Variant* appeared a year later in 1985, by which time Dickson was heavily involved in running Transmission. As I have noted, the links between the ideas and themes represented in the gallery's exhibitions and events were mirrored by the editorial policy and content of *Variant*. In addition to this, *Variant* provided Dickson with a new outlet for his writing, such as the production of newsletters and exhibition texts including that written for the May 1985 Transmission exhibition *Iconoclasm*. The piece, which was included as a free 'hand-out' in issues of *Variant* Issue 2, opened with a short text which acted as a manifesto for the exhibition, and echoed the style of much of Dickson's writing of the time:

Iconoclasm; a brief note – We call iconoclasm the disinvestment of images. Destruction then may be actual or symbolic. Iconoclasm has two sides – the prohibition of the making of images and their destruction. [...] Destructive iconoclasm is the underside and popular reaction to the representations of authority ... In contemporary consumer society, rather than the refusal of images, we find their proliferation and relay through capitalism and the law of the capitalist code. Refusal, i.e. iconoclasm, falls on the side of those against whom these images from advertising, TV and movies are directed. Iconoclasm rests in a class war of images (Dickson, 1985a).

In the text following this, Dickson acknowledged that 'the title for the exhibition – ICONOCLASM – was stolen from an article by the Canadian critic Philip Monk, which appeared in the cross-cultural magazine *ZG* (Heroes issue) titled *Notes on the Sumptuary Destruction of Leaders*'. Dickson's influences are explicitly referenced throughout the piece, including Theodor Adorno's notion of the 'culture industry', Emma Goldman's belief that 'every creative expression must have its being in the social and political fabric of the time' and the ubiquitous presence of Debord:

Guy Debord, whose thought has certainly been one catalysm [sic] among many in this exhibition, wrote that it is through dissatisfaction that a truly radical opposition to capitalist relations grows, and, I speak for the three of us in saying that it forms our point of departure in our art and beyond (Dickson, 1985a).

The end of the piece includes quotes by Susan Sontag and William Blake and biographies of the three *Iconoclasm* artists – Dickson, Muir and Thomson. All three cite their membership of *Variant* magazine alongside their educational credentials and (for Muir and Dickson) their association with Transmission. Thomson's note tells the reader that he produced the work on display since leaving art school and that the paintings are 'based mainly on the devastating effects that capitalism and enforced conformity (regimentation) has on the lives of individuals and the absurdities of consumer culture', again emphasising the interest of the group in 'spectacle' and everyday life. Muir's note quotes Mark E. Smith of the Manchester band The Fall in relation to the problems he associated with television as 'the most serious drug problem in the Western hemisphere'. In citing Mark E. Smith, Muir revealed a particular generational shift in attitudes towards art and culture which were more broadly and expansively reflected in *Variant* – the merging of 'high' and 'low' cultural references in critical writing. Whilst music magazines such as *NME* and *Melody Maker* had begun to quote French poststructuralist theory in their reviews of independent records and gigs, art and culture magazines such as *Variant*, Thomas Lawson's *Real Life* magazine and *ZG* regarded spokesmen such as Smith and other musicians and cultural icons as of equal importance to the 'typical' heavyweight theorists and art historians frequently cited in *Artforum* and *October*. Where writers such as Moffat, Oliver, Crozier and co. had regularly referred to examples from art history, literature and theatre, their sources were almost invariably established, critically respected 'names'. For Dickson, Muir and co., no such official or historical sanction or approval was necessary and the fact that musicians such as Smith were seen as representative of the ideals and hopes

of a very particular time and place in British youth culture made them more, rather than less, relevant to a radical cultural critique. Dickson's biographical information noted:

All these paintings were 'executed' since leaving art school, whilst living on the dole in between bouts of extreme boredom. A part-time drunkard and cynic, I am aspiring to be a small-time Super 8 filmmaker, but finances have prevented this. I am currently working as a labourer, with recurring bouts of extreme boredom. The paintings [sic] in this exhibition represent a synthesis between form and a sensibility I am moving towards. They are, through the process, the closest thing to performance I'll ever get. Extreme boredom. Presently a substitute for transgression. ZZZZZZZ (Dickson, 1985a).

Though tongue-in-cheek, the biographical notes (Dickson's in particular) are revealing in terms of identifying the impetus and motivation for *Variant*, and for 'post-punk' British culture more generally. Specifically, retrospective accounts of 1980s 'DIY' culture both in the UK and latterly in the US (such as West Coast 'Slacker' culture) have theorised the 'aesthetics of boredom' and the notion that boredom itself has acted as a powerful force in generating change and creativity amongst sub-cultural groups, and encouraging transgression. Whilst the economic climate for artists was bleak in the early 1980s, there is undoubtedly a sense that 'being on the dole' was a choice for Dickson and many of his contemporaries. Certainly, for many radicalised youth subcultures (and those individuals with an affinity with them) the avoidance of full-time, 9 to 5 employment was tantamount to an act of resistance, a deliberate opting out of mainstream culture. It also allowed time for similarly minded individuals and groups to devote to alternative, not-for-profit activities – writing articles, publishing 'fanzines', making and swapping cassettes, creating mail art exchanges, starting bands, putting on gigs, organising protests, setting up gallery spaces and so on. *Variant* was a direct result of this very particular cultural and economic climate for young people – 'self-determination' for young, left-leaning artists, musicians, students, writers and the like in the late 1970s and early 1980s was realised through attempts to network between these groups rather than through attempts to seek validation from 'official' or established sources (as had been the case for Moffat, Demarco et al.).

*Variant* Issue 2 focussed on three main issues – the *British Art Show*, New Painting and Punk. It began with 'Three Views of the British Art Show' in which Dickson, Ian Brown and Simon Brown offered their perspectives on the survey exhibition selected and curated by Moffat, amongst others. Dickson's 'View'

here is measured and balanced. He finds much to applaud in the exhibition (particularly the work of Stuart Brisley who would later exhibit at Transmission), and whilst his tone and critical approach are questioning, they are not damning. More than anything, Dickson's text attempts to summarise the key points of Moffat's catalogue essays and ends by presenting subjective responses to the questions raised in Moffat's essay 'New Painting and Old Painting' (discussed in the previous chapter):

In a time when art has been divested of its ability to the world, the extent of the artists marginalization has to be fully comprehended, critically assessed. This is currently being taken up by some artists and critics, and the selectors of the B.A.Sh. are aware of this and to be generous, by their pens, are part of. It is, then, in the thrust of generating ideas that the real value lies here. For the moment, good art simultaneously expresses [sic] a view of the world and a view of art. The dilemma for those with such concerns expressed her [sic], is not how to make political art but how to make art political (Dickson, 1985b, p.7).

Also included in the magazine was a loose-leaf 'late item', a further article on the *British Art Show* by William Clark, who would go on to have an enduring involvement with *Variant* into the 1990s as co-editor of *Variant* Volume 2. Clark's article attempted from the outset to present a more rigorous analysis of the critical framing of the *British Art Show* than any of the other texts in *Variant*. Whilst still polemical in tone (and utterly dogmatic in style), Clark's piece specifically attempted to unravel Moffat's texts, beginning by likening the 'tactics' of the catalogue texts to Alfred H. Barr's 1936 diagram of the development of abstract art.

The British Art Show's efforts are cloaked in the guise of an explanatory guide to philistine Joe Public, but put simply the main purpose of this type of 'criticism' is to encourage sales. [...] the truth of the matter is that Capitalism simply puts artists on a long leash which for art devoid of political questioning or expressing the need for social change can be foolishly mistaken for freedom. There remains a fundamental contradiction in the buying and selling of freedom of expression, particularly when artists lay claims to producing a spiritual depth – a position one can find in both Sandy Moffat's and Jon Thomson's articles in the catalogue to the British Art Show (Clark,1985).

Throughout Clark's article his accusatory statements are pointed particularly in Moffat's direction. Clark's outrage focused primarily on Moffat's strategic use of 'critical weight' in name-checking

Greenberg. But far from furthering the debate on the *British Art Show* in particular, the exhibition was used as a way to discuss Clark's view of Greenberg's 'apolitical and amoral stance on art'. The article traces (and contests) Greenberg's political allegiances and outlines the background to Greenberg's 'bid to put himself and his chosen artists into the orbit of high culture entailing an acquiescence to Capitalist ideology'. Whilst Clark never states explicitly that his assessment of Greenberg and Abstract Expressionism have found their latter-day parallel in Moffat and New Image in Scotland, the implications are abundantly clear – that Greenberg (and Moffat) despite their claims and experience are not (and never were) political radicals and that both, ultimately, used criticism as a device to court the attention of the market. Clark's text is impressive in the depth and breadth of his knowledge and research and his argument reads as an informed, detailed example of revisionist art history. The text is typical of Clark's writing – the bombastic use of factual and historical references, the 'unveiling' of art world power structures and the almost excessive use of point-by-point example to substantiate each statement work to develop a powerful, aggressive rhetoric. The weakness of this approach, though, is the sense that Clark's attempt to convince seems almost paranoid in its determination to 'prove' the validity of his claims. His tendency to exhaustively overstate each detail leads to a dense, rather turgid style of 'conspiracy theory' writing which would reach its apotheosis in later editions of *Variant* Volume 2 in the mid-1990s.

*Variant's* interest in dissecting and criticising the New Painting continued in Issue 2 in an interview with Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton and in a review by Calum McIntyre of the Steven Campbell and Francesco Clemente exhibition at Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery (McIntyre, 1985, pp.26-27). McIntyre's review came closest to what would become an ongoing discussion amongst the *Variant* writers – the accusation that the Scottish New Image painters had 'sold out' through their commercial success and the dilution and co-option of their ideas by the international art market. McIntyre also highlighted that any commercial or critical success inevitably spawned the adoption of a 'formula' on the part of younger artists eager to 'cash in' on the next big thing. Whilst his interpretation of Campbell's work was simplistic and naïve (the assumption, for instance, that Campbell had perpetuated or encouraged a reading of his work as being 'about' Scottish identity when many of Campbell's references were rooted in a very particular brand of 'Englishness', inspired by the writings of P. G. Wodehouse amongst others), McIntyre was correct in his claims that a rash of followers would ape the New Image 'style' and that the 'look' of Campbell's painting would become the mainstay and representative of 'Scottish' painting. In identifying



with the critical position which saw the New Painting as reactionary, politically impotent and representative of a 'retreat' from the 'harsh realities of the world', McIntyre (and *Variant*) stood firmly against the direction in contemporary art championed by Moffat (though Moffat, of course, whilst supporting the 'return to painting' identified the problems and pitfalls of the wholesale embrace of a given 'style'). McIntyre's text began an almost binary, dichotomous critical opposition between the supporters (and producers) of Scottish figurative painting and the *Variant* group of artists and writers. Dickson's later writings, though more critically sophisticated than McIntyre's, reiterate many of the bugbears stipulated in the review, particularly his irritation with the frequent references to the New Image painters working-class credentials and the tendency for the media to discuss class politics in their coverage of the group. Whilst McIntyre directed his venom at Steven Campbell (the most obvious target due to his commercial success and the fact he had 'defected' to New York), Dickson would later target Moffat and Ken Currie in his attempt at a critical dismantling of New Image.

Along with the New Painting articles and reviews, Issue 2 included poetry, a short story, a page-long piece on Transmission Gallery by one of its committee members, and a return to some of the 'sixth-form' humour seen in the pages of *Stigma* in two pages dedicated to 'Glasgow Art Scene Gossip' by 'Cynical Bastard'. While apparently puerile, many of the cartoons and sketches are damningly incisive, and in their own way they offer as much 'criticism' as the longer, more serious texts. The use of humour and parody as a subversive tool also links *Variant* to a network of like-minded leftist zines of the '80s, and to a longer history of political satire in periodicals, journals and pamphlets.<sup>85</sup>

The legacy of Situationism was also writ large across the magazine with a piece by Clifford Harper on the writings of Raoul Vaneigem (an article originally published in issue two of the *New Anarchist Review*) and an article by John A. Walker on 'Malcolm McLaren and the Sources of Punk'. Walker's article attempted to identify the relationships between visual art (and art history) and punk and much of the text focused on McLaren's appropriation of the strategies and techniques of the Situationist International such as the use of détournement in Jamie Reid's graphics for the Sex Pistols and the critique of bourgeois and consumer culture in the lyrics of the Sex Pistols and groups such as Bow Wow Wow.

---

<sup>85</sup> A similar approach and tone can be found in later examples of Glasgow-based artist 'zines, such as *Mainstream* and *Radical Vans and Carriages*, both by Alex Pollard and Iain Hetherington.

Walker's succinct, lucid text acted not only as a legible, engaging analysis of McLaren's strategic exploitation of both 'grassroots' and high culture but also neatly encapsulated many of *Variant's* own interests through 'itemization' of the Situationist ideas employed by McLaren. Whilst McLaren himself was regarded by Dickson, McIntyre and their peers as having betrayed the ethos of punk through the duplicitous use of the look and style of 'radical' politics in the pursuit of commercial success (as the scathing text by Calum McIntyre 'McLaren: The slag of post-Modernist times' reveals, itself closely related to an earlier *Stigma* text on 'The Death of Punk' written by Dickson) the points made by Walker summarising key Situationist concepts can be seen also to have summarized *Variant's* own philosophical and political approach and its attitude towards the style and content of the magazine.

Following the *Iconoclasm* show, the next exhibition programmed by the second Transmission Committee (which now included Dickson, Muir, Thomson, Brown and *Variant* contributor Doug Aubrey) again pursued the ideas and figures surrounding Situationism with *The Map is Not the Territory*, a show held in September 1986 by the British Situationist Ralph Rumney. Again, Dickson wrote a text, 'The Image is Not the Reality,' to accompany the exhibition. Citing C. H. Turner's *The Semantics of Alfred Korzybski*, Dickson highlighted the way in which Rumney's work could be read through the use of key Situationist strategies:

Language fails entirely to make one crucial distinction. It assumes words and the things they describe are identical and so, fails to distinguish between 'maps' in our minds and the territory such maps refer to. If we apply this to a Polaroid photograph of a woman's breasts or body and by stating that 'The Map is Not the Territory' or, in other words, the image is not the reality, a critique of pornography is made. It is here that we apply another Situationist concept – that of 'detournement': 'strategies of subversion or intervention which turn the ruling ideology's own weapons against itself by creating new meanings within the context of capitalist relations (Dickson, 1985c, in Stephenson and McLaughlin, *Transmission*, p.15).

## The *Edinburgh Review*

In the time between the publication of *Variant* Issue 2 and its relaunch in 1987 another publication became the forum for the continuing debate surrounding New Image painting. In 1984 Peter Kravitz became editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, a relaunched version of the *New Edinburgh Review* which had been a term-time journal of the Student Publications Board of Edinburgh University. The format was changed to that of a paperback book and the numbering was continuous with *New Edinburgh Review*, with a double issue – No.67/68 – being the first edited by Kravitz.

Whilst reviving the title of the famous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary journal, the 1984 *Edinburgh Review* was not a continuation of its earlier namesake, though both focused primarily on literary criticism.<sup>86</sup>

In common with many of the artists and writers around *Variant* and *Transmission* at this time, Kravitz had an interest in the history of ‘counter-culture’ in Scotland, such as the works of ‘rebel intellectuals’ Alexander Trocchi and R. D. Laing (*Edinburgh Review* No.70 was devoted to Trocchi, R. D. Laing was a contributor). Kravitz was also taking note of contemporary manifestations of Scottish counter-culture, including recent developments at *Transmission*, and, like Dickson and the artist-writers around *Variant* (and related magazines such as *ZG*), he shared an interest in the crossovers and overlaps between the arts. The new *Edinburgh Review* logo, commissioned from Alasdair Gray, exemplified Kravitz’s editorial approach, as Murdo Macdonald has discussed in his introduction to an anthology of writings published in the *Edinburgh Review* under Kravitz’s editorship. Writing of Kravitz’s first issue (No.67- 68), Macdonald wrote:

[...] this issue showed the beginnings of what were to become enduring commitments to international writing on one hand and visual arts on the other [...] the logo designed by Alasdair Gray [...] united images of industry, celticism, football, media, nature, and writing – all subsumed by the motto ‘To gather all the rays of culture into one’. Few people other than the

---

<sup>86</sup> Between 1980 and 1990 Kravitz had also worked as an editor at Polygon, the former University of Edinburgh student imprint. Kravitz became an influential figure in publishing new Scottish fiction for Polygon and in the pages of the *Review* (such as James Kelman, Alasdair Gray, Agnes Owens, Janice Galloway and Tom Leonard) and encouraging debate between figures involved in the arts and politics in Scotland. Two of the authors represented in the first issue of Kravitz’s *Edinburgh Review* – James Kelman and Jeff Torrington – went on to win the Booker and Whitbread prizes respectively.

editors took this wording seriously at the time, but the generalist project of *Edinburgh Review* as it developed could hardly have been better expressed (Macdonald, 1995, p.5).

Kravitz, though based in Edinburgh, also had an affinity with Glasgow culture, frequently supporting writers from the West of Scotland, and his editorial for the first issue reflected broader shifts in the more progressive quarters of critical writing and publishing. In particular, Kravitz's approach to content and coverage in the *Edinburgh Review* reflected the growing interest in postmodern 'mixing' of so-called high and low culture, seen not only in theoretical shifts and the revision of academic disciplines (such as the New Art History, Visual Culture, Cultural Studies, etc.) but also in more accessible, 'populist' publications as covered in the earlier discussion on *Stigma*. As Kravitz stated in the editorial for the first issue of the 'new' *Edinburgh Review* under his editorship:

The motto from now on will be 'to gather all the rays of culture into one whole'. This does not just mean the complete range of arts and crafts, but culture in its widest possible sense as show in our logo drawn by Alasdair Gray. Culture as something that is not *either* Dostoevsky and Charles Rennie Mackintosh *or* a Guinness in your local and a football match, but BOTH. Of course, culture shows itself in as many different ways as there are forms of life. Therefore since this journal is concerned with the written word, its goal is one of drawing in as many languages as exist (Kravitz, 1984, p.3).

In short, the *Edinburgh Review* reflected – and was part of – wider developments in the form and style of critical writing across a variety of publications. Examples include the gonzo and 'New Journalist' modes of Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson in the US, the critical writings of figures such as Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes and, in the UK, publications such as *NME* and the *Modern Review* (established in the early 1990s by former *NME* journalists Tony Parsons and Julie Burchill). Essentially, the assumptions regarding what a publication could or should cover had been reassessed, with music journalism in particular setting a new standard by integrating high cultural references with reviews of independent records and gigs. From its inception, Kravitz commissioned texts that were both 'straightforward' critical texts and more experimental, stylised writing in, for example, the essays and articles by Kathy Acker and Jenny Turner (whose writing again reflected gonzo journalism in its irreverent, lively first-person narrative).

The main theme of *Edinburgh Review* '72 was the 'New Scottish Painting'. The editorial by Kravitz and essays by Alexander Moffat and Ken Currie started a debate which took hold and dominated critical writing on art in Scotland in the period (many of the issues raised continued to feature in critical writing into the early 1990s in texts by a new generation of art writers and critics such as the artist Ross Sinclair).

What is significant, in terms of this research, is the fact that central critical texts at the heart of the debate were written not by art historians or 'professional' critics, but by the artists directly involved with (or on the periphery of) the 'New Painting' itself. It seemed as though, again, Kravitz had encouraged participants – the artists themselves – rather than detached observers to comment on 'the New Painting'. An advert for Issue 72 (published in *Edinburgh Review* 71) noted that there would be 'a special section on New Scottish Painting' and invited contributions on 'reminiscences of art college' and 'artists on their own paintings (*who says artists can't write?*)'.

In January 1986 Transmission exhibited the work of overtly politically engaged artists from London, Liverpool and Glasgow in the gallery space on Chisholm Street and at Glasgow School of Art under the title *War of Image: Art and the Battle of Ideas*. Several current and former Transmission committee members, including Dickson, Clark, Thomson, Brown and Muir, exhibited their work alongside Ralph Rumney, Glasgow School of Art lecturer and *Variant* contributor Peter Seddon, graphics by the bands Crass and The Intolerants and a number of other artists. The accompanying essays, written by William Clark and Malcolm Dickson, attracted the attention of Kravitz, who quoted both texts in the *Edinburgh Review* No.72. As Dickson has recalled:

The New Image debates started, as far as I recall, from Peter seeing the *War of Images* show at Glasgow School of Art and Transmission and reading the blurb I wrote for that, from which he got to know us and invited us to write something (Dickson, 2010).

Kravitz opened the 'New Painting' issue with an editorial which focused on the state of visual art in Scotland. Along with commenting on the rise of New Image, the text featured Kravitz's view of the artists involved in Transmission:

This group have just the radical and critically aware approach to art that Scotland has lacked until now. They have an openness to an interesting variety of ideas from Situationism, through

the music of 1976/77 and its take-power-into-your-own-hands ethos, to Foucault. Their commitment to an art of ideas that challenge the Britain we live in today is also a challenge to the aestheticism of most art chaos and critics. Theirs is not an art of escape (Kravitz, 1986, p.2).

Clearly impressed by the energy and dissenting voice of the *Variant* and *Transmission* artist-writers, Kravitz quoted them liberally throughout Issue 72<sup>87</sup> and in retrospect it is clear to see why the fierce critical battle lines that ensued in the next three issues of the *Edinburgh Review*, specifically between Dickson and Currie, looked to have been a strategic editorial plan on Kravitz's part.

In the editorial, introducing the theme for the issue, Kravitz's allegiances were quite clear, though in places the text suggested that he was playing devil's advocate. The main thrust of his commentary was an attempt to contextualise recent developments in the art world and to try to account for the 'return' to figurative painting. Kravitz's explanation for this shift was that the success of figurative painting was intrinsically linked to the market, to 'supply and demand' between dealers and investors:

What had happened was the dealers of East 57<sup>th</sup> St., many of whom had made their money up until the late seventies from abstract expressionists and pop artists, had run out of things to sell. [...] One of the main reasons for this large demand may have been the predominantly uncommercial or, more accurately, *anti-commercial* nature of much conceptual and performance art of the seventies (Kravitz, 1986, p.3).

Flanked by excerpts in the margin from a text in *Variant* extolling the virtues of video art, and an excerpt from Malcolm Dickson's text for the *War of Images* exhibition, Kravitz's text emphasised the criticality of performance and video work. Although questioning in tone, Kravitz then implied that Campbell and Wiszniewski had 'sold out' by producing what he described as 'marketable' and commercial work ('the escapism and cynical market-awareness of Campbell and Wiszniewski') before adding a more positive note acknowledging that the impact of 'the Campbell-Wiszniewski phenomenon' had created 'an air of excitement which no one would have thought possible five years ago'. Kravitz also commented that, because of the New Image group 'painters see that it is possible to be both Scottish *and* International'

---

<sup>87</sup> Kravitz's interest in the *War of Images* exhibition, and in the texts by Clark and Dickson, led to an ongoing association between the *Edinburgh Review*, *Transmission* and *Variant* throughout the 1980s, including the *Transmission Goes Verbal* series of literary events which began in August 1986, just a few months after *War of Images*.

(Kravitz, 1986, p.4). Overall, though, Kravitz's allegiances were clear. The text centres around his scepticism towards New Image painting, and strongly suggests that much of the work had been strategically and cynically geared towards the market. In this way, Kravitz asserted that this kind of careerism undermined any critical or political content and that, ultimately, the 'New Painting' was a conservative, escapist 'retreat' from the realities of the world (dealt with successfully by video and performance). Whilst acknowledging the value of New Painting in terms of revitalising the enthusiasm of young artists in Scotland, Kravitz concluded the editorial by praising what he clearly saw as an antidote to New Image – the *War of Images* show.

Alexander Moffat, by now regarded publicly as the critical and curatorial force behind the success of the 'New Glasgow Boys', was a key contributor to the special section devoted to the New Scottish Painting. Moffat's essay returned to a subject he had long discussed – certain paragraphs were almost identical to those written a decade earlier (Moffat, 1977, p.3). The essay discusses Moffat's claim that 'in the twentieth century Scotland's best artists have worked as exiles', citing Alan Davie, William Crozier, Bruce MacLean, Eduardo Paolozzi and John Bellany, Alan Johnston and Thomas Lawson as examples of artists who had escaped a 'narrow-minded and moribund' art world. In terms of this research, Moffat also acknowledged that 'a new awareness and confidence' was 'built up during the 1970s' which was 'now available to Scottish artists'. This awareness and confidence was certainly aided by a developing understanding of the role of writing. In Moffat's text, as ever, he emphasised the need to retain 'an elemental Scottishness' whilst being open to broader shifts in art and culture. Essentially, though, the essay acted as a kind of defence of the decision of some of Moffat's former students to leave Scotland. One of the major criticisms of Steven Campbell had focused on his move to New York, which was regarded by many as a betrayal and abandonment of the city that 'made him' in pursuit of commercial success. Whilst these accusations were reductive and oversimplified, Moffat's question (referring to Campbell, Gwen Hardie and Margaret Hunter) asked why 'the present generation of artistic emigrants' 'should seek to leave a much improved situation' (Moffat, 1986, p.83). In answer to his own question, Moffat presented another call for a change in attitudes in Scottish art and a caution to avoid complacency in the face of Scotland's now international reputation:

Campbell's importance lies in the fact he has gone to New York and 'made it'. The repercussions he has left in his wake have raised expectations and genuine (and let it be said, not so genuine) artistic ambitions [...] The reason for going isn't simply to escape from an artistic backwater; nor

is it to add a few finishing touches to one's artistic education. It is about laying down a challenge in the world's art capitals. The best of the young Scottish artists are no longer prepared to wait for second-hand information and ideas filtering through to Scotland (Moffat, 1986, p.85).

Moffat's text, then, supported Steven Campbell in the face of accusations that he had 'sold out' by moving away: 'their actions [...] do not suggest a total rejection of Scotland. On the contrary, their success has meant an increased reputation and status for Scottish art, and their impact in Scotland has already been remarkable.' Essentially, the essay, titled 'Artists In Exile', attempted to critically frame or reframe the notion of the 'artist in exile' as the 'artist as ambassador' for Scottish art. However convincing Moffat's argument, though, many artists remained resolutely unconvinced by his claims. Campbell's move to New York remained a contentious issue, and an easy target for Glasgow-based critics, into the early 1990s.

It would be oversimplified to suggest that the positions adopted were, on one side, a pro-New Image stance on the part of Moffat and Currie and, on the other, an anti-New Image stance by Dickson and Clark. Currie's position in particular was perhaps the most complex. Before his text began, however, the page opposite featured text from William Clark's 'War of Images' essay, an editorial decision which could not be seen as anything but strategic on Kravitz's part. In its placement, the Clark text seemed to have been designed as both preface and counter-attack to the Currie text and only added to Currie's anger when Issue 72 was published. According to Currie (2002), when he was commissioned by Kravitz he believed it was for the *New Edinburgh Review* (an earlier incarnation of the *Review*) which was very much a magazine format. He was surprised, therefore, to see his 'magazine' article published in a book and claimed that he had been ill-prepared for Dickson's 'counter-attack' in the following issue. He has consistently referred to the incident as a 'set-up' engineered by Kravitz and Dickson, though Alexander Moffat's more measured view was that, as opposed to a 'set-up', Kravitz had acted as an insightful and clever editor 'with a good eye for a debate' (Moffat, 2002).

For Currie, as one of the artists at the centre of the New Image circle in Scotland, his argument was necessarily supportive of the 'New Painting', but with this general support came a number of stringently argued qualifiers. Specifically, Currie was at pains to emphasise the problems he saw in the way the New



Image painters had been marketed and critically framed as a 'group'.<sup>88</sup> Much of the text, therefore, was an attempt by Currie to disassociate his work from that of Campbell, Howson and Wiszniewski and to undermine the public perception of his work as being representative of a movement or 'school', describing himself as 'resentful of being lumped in with this "New Glasgow School"'.<sup>89</sup> What is interesting about this in the context of this thesis are the added difficulties presented to the artist-critic, whose art work and writing are frequently considered as inextricable 'critical' statements. Where one is judged, so is the other, as Charles Harrison (quoted in the introduction to this thesis) noted:

Artists' art criticism is something of a special case, but the more secure the author's identity as an artist, the more likely it is that any critical writing will be read with a view to that artist's work rather than to the work it explicitly addresses (Harrison, 2001, p.6)

Like much of Cordelia Oliver's writing of the previous decade (and much of Moffat's), Currie's text (Currie, 1986) sought to situate the New Painting in a specifically Scottish context, looking at the characteristics of Scottish painting and its recent history. Currie attempted to 'look at the context out of which the "New Glasgow School" emerged, as a way of gauging its significance' by discussing what he regarded as the weaknesses and limitations of the Scottish tradition (described as 'immensely flawed' and 'unable to deal with more challenging subject matter or explore ideas'). According to Currie, Scottish art had long suffered from a kind of 'built-in obsolescence' and an 'intellectual and cultural parochialism' in the face of the realities of Scotland. Currie's text is remarkably similar in its view of Scottish art to that expressed by Cordelia Oliver in many of her reviews of the Royal Scottish Academy in the 1960s and 1970s, specifically accusing Scottish painting as being arrogant, insular, and wilfully ignorant of broader shifts in Europe. Currie's text is vituperative, if in many ways accurate, in its account of Scottish painting, going on to describe it as being guilty of an 'infuriating anti-intellectualism' and a 'raging paranoia about being influenced by political, philosophic or literary ideas'. Like Moffat's earlier writings, Currie's text focuses on the failure of artists to 'face up to the reality' of contemporary Scotland. For Currie, where subjects such as poverty or alcoholism appeared as subject matter in

---

<sup>88</sup> While undoubtedly the New Image painters were brought together by Moffat's curation and critical representation, his original catalogue essay explicitly refutes the notion that the six should be seen as a coherent group: 'To imply that these six artists form a proper group [...] would be a mistake'. Rather, Moffat claims that the 'common ground' rests on their shared experience of Glasgow, Glasgow School of Art and their interest in the figurative idiom, though even here he adds that the extent to which this 'common ground' has shaped their art 'varies from individual to individual' (Moffat, 1985, p.6).

<sup>89</sup> This is something Currie has continued to do until the present. See, for example, the interview in the 2003 Glasgow School of Art exhibition catalogue.

painting they had been 'tainted with a sort of liberal sentimentality' due to 'the tendency of Glasgow artists to be predominantly middle-class'. Again, reiterating Moffat's long-held position, Currie compared the failure of Scottish art with the successes of other art forms:

[...] the work of many Scottish painters is pitiful in comparison with our writers, poets, dramatists, theatre groups, film-makers and musicians, who, in recent years, have made an outstanding contribution to the emergence of an indigenous and committed national culture (Currie, 1986, p.72).

Currie's text continued by examining the context of Glasgow as a place in which art could be produced. Like Moffat's essay (considered later) and many of his previous texts, Currie sought to outline the very real obstacles faced by artists living in a city with no market, few galleries, and few investors. Currie ascribes some of these issues not wholly to Glasgow's economic position, but to the fact that 'there is no real demand for art in Scotland; it has never been seen as a viable investment for Scotland's wealthy, perhaps because of a residual anti-culturalism left by Scottish Calvinism on the conscience of the rich.' He also accuses Glasgow as having a 'mistrust of art as a career [...] it is the heritage of *workerism* in Glasgow that has constantly marginalised writers and artists'(Currie, 1986, p.73). In the preceding paragraph, however, Currie wrote a sentence around which much of the polemics which followed centred, and these particular words offered Dickson the critical ammunition he needed in his response.

[...] although we all despise how capitalism has enmeshed art with money, it boils down to simple economics; paint and sell or starve – principles will never pay the rent and this is called pragmatism, not an excuse (Currie, 1986, p.72).

This claim was seen by Currie's detractors as an attempt to justify a compromised position. This was made more so in Currie's further attempts to distance himself from the 'opportunism' of Campbell and Wisniewski, accusing them of having 'latched onto the more international dimension of the trend towards figuration.' In critical terms, Currie's text attempted to 'undo' or minimise the perception of his work as belonging to a group who, whilst they were 'united in condemnation of the traditions of Scottish art' and 'a burning ambition to achieve something new', also had 'no common programme, rarely exchanged ideas, at times were diametrically opposed in terms of subject matter and content and were fuelled by a passionate, often violent rivalry' (Currie, 1986, p.73). As I will discuss, for Currie's critical opponents, it was this very distancing and attempt at separation which led to his being accused

of 'hypocrisy'. In trying to establish or explain the gulf between his work ('the more committed and hard-hitting kind of painting'), and the fashionable work he saw as being in thrall to the market, Currie appeared (to his critics at least) to be presenting a self-righteous front, attempting to present his work, and the work of Peter Howson, as having more integrity than Campbell and Wisniewski. The article as a whole, though, ended optimistically, echoing Kravitz's claims that, whatever its faults, the New Painting had opened up new possibilities for artists in Scotland. This was very much in line with Moffat's essays for the *British Art Show* two years previously, which similarly acknowledged the pitfalls and limitations of 'New Image' or 'New Painting' as a fashion, whilst applauding its potential in encouraging debate. Like Moffat, Currie recognised that whilst 'the situation is a vast improvement on what we had before', 'there are dangers'. For Currie, the dangers were that 'Glasgow could simply be 'flavour of the month' and that 'reputations are perilously staked on the success of particular artists'. He added that, 'aside from this there is the acute danger that many art students and established artists, eager to emulate the commercial success of the likes of Campbell and Wisniewski, may, at the expense of artistic quality and integrity, jump on the bandwagon' and 'ruin the whole thing' (Currie, 1986, p.74).

For Dickson, the fault lines in Currie's argument were even deeper, and recalled the political divides of their student days and writings for *Stigma*. Currie, as always, wrote from a traditional leftist perspective, citing John Maclean as a way of promoting an optimistic response to New Painting in Glasgow as presenting a possibility to 'make Glasgow a revolutionary centre second to none' (Currie was later mocked by Dickson for this reference, with the implication being that to cite McLean was clichéd). Coupled with his sentence on the 'sell or starve' situation facing artists in Glasgow, the following paragraph proved to be the catalyst for a flurry of debate around the 'New Painting', couched again in terms of a political division as much as an artistic one. Whilst Currie may have been dismayed at the mordant response from Dickson in *Edinburgh Review 73*, there is little doubt that in spite of a larger editorial 'game-plan' on Kravitz's part, much of Currie's text, like his earlier writings for *Stigma*, were nothing if not antagonistic. The paragraph most cited by Dickson almost demanded a response:

On the surface I find little to complain about in these developments and intend to avoid knee-jerk reactions which cynically condemn it all with a sort of holier-than-thou purity – the curse of the dogmatic left. To condemn or dismiss things out of hand without proper analysis is not, I believe, in the spirit of Marxism (Currie, 1986, p.74).

In Issue 73 (whose cover featured a painting by Peter Thomson from the *War of Images* exhibition) both Dickson and William Clark responded to the essays of the previous issue. In doing so they essentially kick-started what amounted to a critical locking of horns. Their texts generated a bitter divide between supporters and detractors of the New Image Glasgow artists.

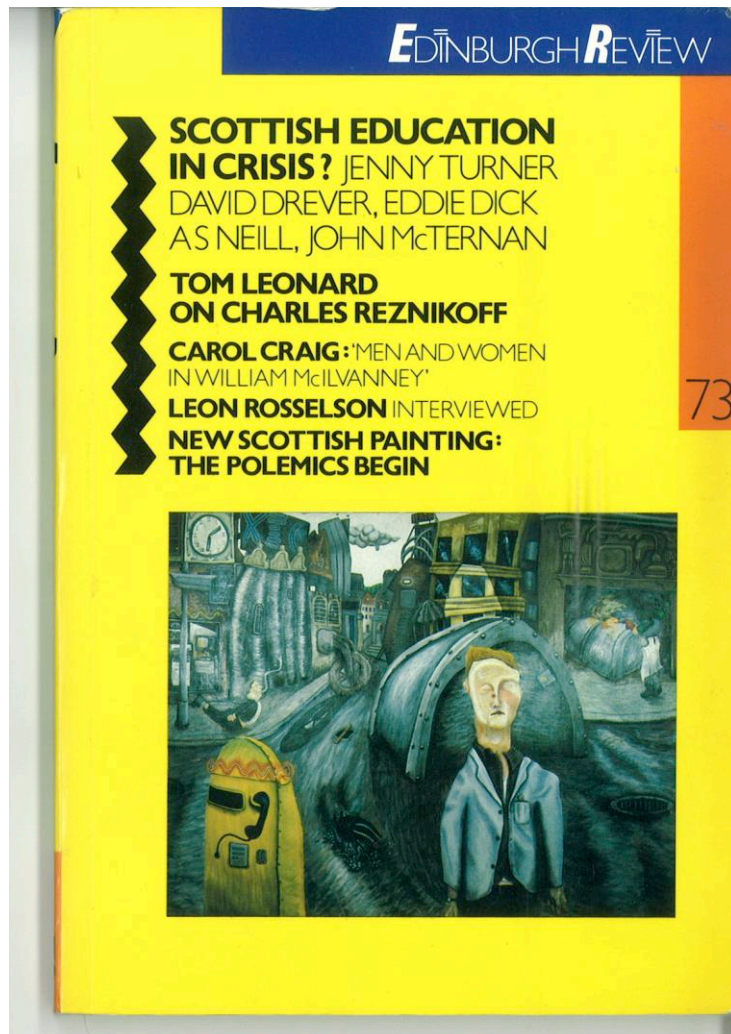


Fig.30 Cover of the *Edinburgh Review* Number 73, 1986

From the outset Dickson's text, 'Polemics: Glasgow Painting Now', hit hard at his targets. As I have outlined, Dickson had first-hand experience of the figures he discussed in the text, having shared studios with several of the New Image group at Glasgow School of Art, and having also been taught by Moffat. The essay opened almost in the manner of an exposé, highlighting the social capital between the figures and strongly implying that Moffat's promotion of the so-called 'New Glasgow Boys' was, at its heart, an example of paternalistic 'cronyism'. As a whole, the text read as a damning indictment of New Image.

More than anything, Dickson's modus operandi was to use his opponents' own words to critically ensnare them. And while straightforwardly written and not overtly stylised, the tone of the text veers between sarcasm (often through the use of inverted commas), anger and a kind of writerly snarl.<sup>90</sup> As such, the text is very much of its time. Much of the writing emerging from 1980s youth culture in zines, music magazines, tracts and issue-based writing adopted an aggressive punk (or post-punk) attitude which appalled older generations in much the same way that punk itself had offended middle England (and Scotland) in the late 1970s. In contrast, Currie's writing bears a much closer relationship to Moffat's and as such seems allied to earlier models of Leftist criticism. Even when dogmatic and rhetorical, Currie's and Moffat's texts aim to convince the reader in a traditional paternalistic manner which relies on the paced delivery of information, example and well-crafted prose. In writing by Dickson and Clark little of the desire to 'bring around' the reader is in evidence. Like the punk ethos itself, their delivery is bombastic, unapologetic and almost deliberately aggressive. It seeks no approval or validation but instead aims to shock the reader out of complacency rather than attempting to persuade. Even the speed and pace of delivery seems accelerated in writings by Dickson in particular, which again has parallels in the music of early 1980s anarchist/punk circles.<sup>91</sup> Ironically, however, the patterns adopted by all of these writers – Moffat, Clark, Dickson and Currie – can nevertheless be regarded as examples of classical rhetoric. In James Elkins' *Our Beautiful, Dry and Distant Texts* (Elkins, 2000, p.238) the author discusses Meyer Schapiro's essay 'Still Life as a Personal Object', writing:

The text's opening [...] is only thirteen lines long, and it begins without any flourish, preamble, or circumlocution [...] This is what Henri Morier, the French rhetorician, calls an "exorde par attaque du point neurologique," an opening impatient with its own duty to summarise and introduce. [...] Full-length articles tend to multiply these opening lines, so that the initial exordium is followed by another, more specific one, and so forth, until the matter at hand is broached.

---

<sup>90</sup> Class War founder Ian Bone has described this kind of writing as 'invective' journalism.

<sup>91</sup> Before the text is subject to scrutiny, it is important to note that since Currie's and Dickson's essays were written both artists have qualified and revised the views expressed in their writing for the *Edinburgh Review*. Both have also acknowledged the weaknesses in their respective approaches. Whilst never apologetic, Dickson has nevertheless noted that 'some of the writing [for the *Edinburgh Review*] was quite naive' despite maintaining that 'certain things had to be said and you've got to be controversial and take that approach sometimes' (Dickson, 2002).

In many of these texts of the 1980s, for the *Edinburgh Review* and elsewhere, the artist-writers discussed here adopt a similar approach, and a sense of ‘impatience’ of the kind Elkins identifies in Schapiro, can be seen in the writers’ rush to deliver their argument, and their tendency, in some cases, to avoid acknowledging anything which might in some way present doubt or ambiguity. In short, these texts are presented as ‘truths’, leaving no space for the reader to come to his or her own conclusion. In these essays, conclusions are locked down, and any discrepant information is left to one side.

In an interview in 2002 Dickson acknowledged that his approach in the *Edinburgh Review* texts was strategically provocative:

A long time ago I did some things for the *Edinburgh Review* at the time when New Image Glasgow had started and I tried to stir up some debate because it wasn’t happening elsewhere. That [being controversial] was exactly the approach I took. I just wrote what I thought and I didn’t care much about the consequences. The Sandy Moffats of the world haven’t forgotten that (Dickson, 2002).

A number of passages from ‘Polemics: Glasgow Painting Now’ are worth considering in detail in order to represent the style and tone adopted by Dickson, and to understand why this particular essay lay at the heart of the debate. The opening passage read:

The ‘phenomenon’ of New Painting in Scotland has been represented and monopolised by a group of six men who exhibited together in a show calling itself *New Image Glasgow*, and initiated, selected and written about by Alexander Moffat. These painters (Stephen Barclay, Steven Campbell, Ken Currie, Pete Howson, Mario Rossi and Adrian Wiszniewski) trained at Glasgow School of Art, where Moffat is a tutor, and all of them arrived at their present mode of expression – some more independently than others – by assimilating an internationally approved style which has been interpreted as operating in a specifically Scottish context (Dickson, 1986a, p.59).

Although the paragraph reads as a simple statement of fact, there are clear clues as to Dickson’s position. The use of inverted commas around ‘phenomenon’ immediately suggests that the focus of the text will be to unpack and analyse this so-called phenomenon and reveal its true nature. Following the emphasis on explaining the connections between the ‘six men’ and their former tutor and champion,

Dickson goes on to claim that some of the artists had 'arrived at their present mode of expression' more independently than others, again implying that some of the artists had been moulded or 'groomed' by Moffat to fit with his agenda (a point Dickson returns to later in the essay). Finally, the careful wording and use of the word 'interpreted' forms the focus of the last major point for Dickson – the strategic 'packaging' and critical framing of New Image.

He continues the text by quoting from the *New Image Glasgow* catalogue and in doing so, lines up his first target, Sandy Moffat (described as 'impresario and patriarch of *New Image Glasgow*'), who he accuses of displaying 'a certain amount of wit and verve by asking the rhetorical question "Why should such a concentration of vital young painters suddenly burst forth in Glasgow, a city where for the past quarter of a century the visual arts have appeared backward looking and parochial?"' (Dickson, 1986a, p.60). Dickson correctly identifies and discusses the fact that, far from being a 'sudden' appearance, Moffat himself had long been 'a crusader for the return of History Painting' and that through platforms such as the *British Art Show* he had called for 'a return to figurative painting on a grand scale'. Again, though, Dickson's ire is reserved for the way in which New Image has been written:

Without exception, writers of this new 'phenomenon' have looked through their tinted prisms and seen that this heralds a new day for Scottish art [...] It also offers international prestige, the artist as Romantic hero, accumulation of wealth, social and cultural power and a reassertion of the Marketplace (Dickson, 1986a, p60).

The mainstay of the text after these introductory paragraphs is a series of comments aimed directly at Ken Currie, as artist, political spokesperson and critical writer. Dickson begins his mounting tirade by quoting Currie's review of the *Contemporary Art from Scotland* exhibition, published in *Stigma* in 1983 and discussed earlier in this chapter. Specifically, Dickson quotes Currie's condemnation of artists who 'seem to have an overt and blatant concern with money and, inevitably, status' and which goes on to accuse those artists as having compromised their vision for the sake of ensuring their work becomes a 'saleable commodity'. According to Dickson, 'Currie's arguments still stand though this time against himself. The ghost of his former self has come back to haunt him.' Dickson notes the amount for which Currie's paintings had recently sold, with a reminder that Currie himself had, in *Stigma*, condemned similar prices of works in the *Contemporary Art from Scotland* exhibition. A knowledge of the history of Dickson's and Currie's differing political allegiances, as seen in *Stigma*, provides a context for many of

the further points raised. In many respects, then, both artist-writers can be seen as representative of their ideological position. This is revealed in both the style and content of the texts, and the antagonism between Currie and Dickson undoubtedly harks back to their oppositional stance on leftist politics. Dickson made explicit reference to Currie as a Marxist: '[...] his offensive remarks about inferior no-hope artists whatever they may be, confirms this Marxist's role in the division of labour and the new class power this cadre commands' (Dickson, 1986a, p.62). To emphasise the division, Dickson writes of Currie:

His previous intransigence and hard-line stance was vulnerable and has subsequently been dropped, which probably does not conflict with his role as a devoted disciple of the Party, unable to believe that a socialist consciousness can develop without the aid of a party (Dickson, 1986a, p.61).

Dickson's sideswipe regarding Currie's inability to 'believe that a socialist consciousness can develop without the aid of a party' is an obvious reference to Dickson's own socialist/anarchist position. The next line, however, was one that reverberated in a furious flurry of responses in Issue 74: 'Every man has his price. Currie's concessions to the ruling order and his apologetics confirm this.' Following this, Dickson discussed his view that whilst New Image had been said to have represented a class shift from middle to working-class backgrounds (in terms of the artists themselves), Currie was the only artist to have drawn on 'a wealth of images from working class history and its implications for socialism'. Up to this point, Dickson had briefly discussed the so-called 'characteristics' of New Image without discussing the works in detail. In the section that followed, Dickson offered a perceptive and plausible analysis of the way Currie's works had become successful in relation not only to art world trends, but to the specific socio-political and economic context of Britain in 1986:

Because his work represents a class position, it is unlikely that his work would have been accommodated and bought a year ago at the height of the miners' struggle. As that represented, perhaps, something that is now fading, Currie's work is more consumable and the man himself is no longer a threat. The 'use-value' of his work has been neutralised (Dickson, 1986a, p.61).

The reference to Marx's notion of use-value (in inverted commas/parentheses) and excerpts from another *Stigma* article written by Currie which discusses the way in which 'Capitalism demands a



commercial art that does not challenge the existing order' are further examples of Dickson's claim that Currie's 'arguments still stand though this time against himself'. The implication, though veiled here, is that Currie's socialist paintings are little more than commercial kitsch, an uncritical, nostalgic representation of a forgotten class struggle. Dickson continues, with growing aggression, to accuse Currie's 'apology for his complete turnaround in principle' as 'pathetic', describing Currie's involvement in community arts activities as an example of his hypocrisy in wanting 'his bread buttered on both sides' (i.e. a reputation as a credible socialist artist of integrity and a successful commercial painter). At this juncture, Dickson returns to Currie's essay in the previous issue, citing the line discussed earlier, 'paint and sell or starve – principles don't pay the rent and this is called pragmatism, not an excuse'.

Interestingly, in terms of the criticism of criticism, Dickson also takes note of Currie's paternalistic critical mode:

[...] his self-appointed position on other people's judgements verges on the offensive (my italics): *we* all despise how ... everyone *must* broadly agree that the situation we have now is a vast improvement on what we had before (Dickson, 1986a, p.62).

The essay continues in its vituperative condemnation of New Image, laced with sarcasm aimed at Currie in particular ('For Currie, politics is a 9 to 5 job, which is about as radical as wearing white socks and Doc Marten shoes'). The long-held animosity between Dickson and Currie is also brought to bear, with Dickson taking umbrage at Currie's claim that there was a dearth of exhibition spaces in Glasgow without mentioning Transmission (from which he had resigned 'with the reason that his art operates outside and rejects the gallery system' and that 'the committee of the gallery were 'bourgeois'). Dickson's vitriol was clearly geared towards Currie – seemingly no stone was left unturned in his attempt to expose Currie's foibles and embarrass him for past 'sins'.

Whilst Dickson perhaps overstates the case here, and verges on the hyperbolic in his conspiratorial view of class division, his viewpoint nevertheless reflects the almost paranoid political climate of the era, in which the working class were becoming increasingly disenfranchised and marginalised both culturally and economically under Thatcher's government. In spite of this, though, Dickson's interpretation of Currie's rise to fame in the aftermath of the miners' strike is left unsubstantiated and remains a speculative, assumptive argument ('it is unlikely'). Certainly, no discrepant evidence is sought for balance and Dickson's claims seem rather reductive and oversimplified. Later in the essay, similar points

are made more broadly, and, as a result, more convincingly, such as Dickson's discussion of the economic forces which determine the form, content and direction of art ('completely overlooked by those critics praising *New Image Glasgow*'). He discusses the demand for 'easel painting' in the context of a shift to the Right, the era of capitalist self-interest and the 'Conservative government's philistine attacks on Fine Art' which could accommodate only 'safe and unoffensive [sic] options'.<sup>92</sup> At its heart, though, alongside the political conflict he demanded to play out with Currie, Dickson's argument rests on his dismay at the promotion of a few 'art stars' as representative of a whole culture (contemporary art in Scotland) which has resulted not in 'a generative cultural atmosphere' but both a 'massive surge in careerism' and bitterness and resentment on those excluded from 'the spectacle'.

Ultimately, though, towards the conclusion Dickson's fury is reserved for what he sees as the machinations of the art world's infrastructure and hidden power relations, or, specifically, the failure of criticism to acknowledge these relations in their interpretation of *New Image* and other groups.

The talk surrounding 'New Image' takes something in the guise of the political; Moffat talks of the 'revolutionary potential' in Glasgow of this art, though political struggle and social change is not what he is referring to. No polemical stance has accompanied the exhibition, no historical or political critique, which is precarious in a city where no magazine or forum for discussion of ideas exist (sic) [...] The Scottish Art world is still controlled by a close-knit group of people, Arts Council officials, art school teachers, one or two critics, a couple of gallery owners or directors and a few businessmen with an eye for the aesthetic (Dickson, 1986a, p.63).

The paragraph concludes by inadvertently reiterating Moffat's long-held view that 'Criticism and open discussion are important if the situation of false consciousness and fake dialogue is to be avoided.' The essay's final assertion is Dickson's view that in spite of the changed reputation for Scottish art 'structures remain unchanged [...] things are still controlled by the same people [...] In time-honoured tradition artists are once again turning their backs on the world.'

---

<sup>92</sup> Dickson's view in this case tallies with that of many contemporary 'anti-figurative painting' critics such as Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Craig Owens and Mira Schor regarding the links between neo-expressionism and the market, yet his perspective focussed on this work as emerging from a specifically 1980s British and Scottish context in relation to its reactionary political position. Whilst less theorised (and not intended for a specifically academic readership), Dickson's position is significant in terms of his understanding of the geopolitical contexts out of which such painting emerged in Scotland (rather than the broader focus of the *October* group) along with that fact that he was one of very few writers in Scotland to denounce such work.

Whilst much of what Dickson writes in this section is, in the main, correct, he again overstates the case, especially in his claim that ‘no historical or political critique’ has taken place. At this time there was growing discontent internationally surrounding the revival of painting both at home and abroad, particularly from US-based critics, and even Moffat and Currie had acknowledged and discussed the potential problems inherent in such work, as well as attempting to establish a historical context for it, both in the *Edinburgh Review* and, for example, in Moffat’s writings for the *British Art Show* catalogue.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, for Moffat, the existence of the New Painting was itself a ‘critique’ of the dominance of abstraction in Scotland and a disavowal of ‘new media’. In relation to the painting coming out of Scotland specifically, it is true that the writing surrounding ‘the New Glasgow Boys’ tended to be unquestioningly celebratory, yet there were growing murmurs surrounding the promotion of such an exclusive group of men (and much of the subsequent criticism of ‘New Painting in Scotland’ referred particularly to the gendered aspect of both the artists and the paintings themselves). Even when not directly critical of the New Image Glasgow group itself, the increased efforts to exhibit and discuss the work of women artists in Scotland could in themselves be read as an attempt to offer a revised history of recent artistic developments in Scotland and several attempts were made to coin the term ‘Glasgow Girls’ to promote the work of women artists.<sup>94</sup> What is noteworthy in the context of this research, however, is that Dickson clearly equates ‘critique’ with explicitly oppositional writing. This again makes his position very much of its time. Whilst much of what Dickson represents could be seen as being broadly ‘postmodern’ in terms of position and approach, his understanding of the function of criticism is nevertheless limited to a largely Modernist model of criticism in which to be ‘critical’ a negative appraisal or judgement must be made or truths ‘revealed’. In thinking about criticism as being fundamentally and primarily concerned with judgement and opposition (as opposed, for example, to a rigorous, contextual ‘reading’ of works which remains largely positive in its evaluation) and in applying a dogmatic, linear approach to the delivery of his material, Dickson’s approach again links his writing firmly to its era. In this way, whilst it is distinct in form to the writing of Moffat and Currie, it is also

---

<sup>93</sup> In fact, Cordelia Oliver was one of few Scottish voices to criticise New Image, not from an anti-painting, or even anti-figurative painting perspective, merely with a sceptical, critical eye over the heralding of the ‘next big thing’ and the tendency to overlook existing figurative painters such as Patricia Douthwaite, Tom Macdonald and Carole Gibbons. In a catalogue essay on Douthwaite’s work published in 1988, Oliver’s introduction seems little more than a sideswipe at Moffat and New Image, where she describes ‘the lemming rush back to narrative figuration’ which ‘has seemed to produce little but the obvious and banal in contemporary painting’ (Oliver, 1988, p.7).

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, the 1985 article by Kaye Lynch, Sheena MacGregor and Jacki Parry: ‘Women Artists in Glasgow’(Carrell (1985, p.8).

distinct from later approaches such as the tendency towards more allusive, literary and relational forms of 'art writing' in Scottish criticism of the mid-to-late 1990s.<sup>95</sup>

As I will go on to discuss later in this thesis, it is my contention that there is the potential for a critical component to be present across these forms. In short, though, Dickson's unproblematised assumption of what criticism 'is' again reveals the complexity of defining the term itself.

Dickson's position was bolstered by the inclusion of an essay by fellow *Variant* writer and Transmission Committee member William Clark. The title of Clark's short text, 'The new spirit in art marketing', was a pun on the title of the seminal pro-figurative painting exhibition the *New Spirit in Painting*, held at the Royal Academy in London in 1981 which Clark claims 'provided a borrowed rationale' for Campbell and Wisniewski. Clark's no-holds-barred approach to critical writing seems, even more than Dickson's, to be almost hyperbolic in its condemnation of New Image painting. (*The New Spirit in Painting* exhibition, for example, is described as 'probably the biggest travesty of the original aims of the avant-garde since Hitler's *Entartete Kunst* of 1937; only this time instead of degenerate art we had regenerate art (Clark, 1986, p.67).

Overall, however, Clark's text deals with his perception of 'New Painting' in Scotland as being utterly in thrall to the market. But where Dickson's text briefly discussed Moffat's role in relation to the emergence of New Image Glasgow, and identified the broad circles of power in the Scottish art world, Clark's text discusses Moffat's position, specifically, in detail. Indeed, whilst Dickson's ire was reserved for Currie, Moffat is the clear target for Clark. Similarly, whilst Currie's work is the victim of critical brickbats in Dickson's text, Clark focuses his wrath on the work of Steven Campbell (in fact, Currie and Howson are singled out as having some merit, if faint). Again, though, Clark uses the writing surrounding New Image as the focus of his attack, citing the 'tentative description of a "new movement" in Scottish art' in the magazine *Visual Arts in Glasgow* as drawing its 'view of Glasgow from books rather than real life'. (Clark was referring to a one-off magazine published in April 1985 by the Third Eye Centre in association with *Arts Review* Magazine, titled 'The Visual Arts in Glasgow: Tradition and Transformation'

---

<sup>95</sup> Although I suggest that these more stylised and 'literary' forms became visible in the mid to late 1990s there are clearly numerous precursors to these modes of art writing, both historical and contemporaneous with Dickson's writing, such as Frank Kuppner's 'art criticism in verse' in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review*.

– see Carrell, 1985). He goes on to lambast the magazine, with particular emphasis on Moffat's essay 'The New Glasgow Style: Painting in Glasgow 1980 -85':

In Alexander Moffat's essay, revolution is little more than an aphorism, delivered with typical lacklustre stridency and incorporated solely to spice up an article which basically consists of tips for the top. When it comes to the actual catalogue, it is almost as if we were witnessing something along the lines of Papal indulgences being dispensed by the show's organiser and chief apologist – pronouncing this supposed avant-garde exonerated from vacuousness, careerism and other such sins, simply because this is all there is (Clark, 1986, p66).

In particular, however, Clark's anger rests on his view of Moffat as the leader of an exclusive coterie. Moffat, it should be noted, had never attempted to conceal his connections with the New Image Glasgow painters, so some of Clark's comments seem to attempt to reveal what is 'hidden in plain sight'. Nevertheless, Clark's understanding of how so-called groups and movements are constructed through curation and criticism is incisive, if unfair in its assumption regarding Moffat's motivation for his involvement (and in some respects echoes Currie's claims surrounding the disparate approaches of the artists said to be representative of New Image):

[...] only his particularly liberal view and immense vested interest could represent such diverse talents as anything like a unified body: the essential link is himself. Are these artists a genuine vanguard – or are they an example of how the role of curator or director has risen in prominence? If new trends are not present, they can be manufactured (Clark, 1986, p.66).

In the next paragraph Clark attacks Steven Campbell, describing him as 'a consummate capitalist' whose 'motto is: esoteric nonsense in the guise of freedom of expression', before quickly returning to a discussion of Moffat. Like Dickson, Clark's main concern seems to revolve around the notion that Moffat alone had 'engineered' New Image, selecting from an elite group of his own students, and had thereby established a monopoly over the representation, critical reception and exhibition of their works:

Perhaps for Alexander Moffat to present occasionally his *crème-de-la-crème*<sup>96</sup> seems innocent enough, or at least a variation in the stultifying boredom of the regular tutor/Glasgow Institute/art club epigones exhibitions. But what we have here is a one-man enclave who personally dominates and channels the avenues of artistic expression (gallery space, critical platforms, Arts Council funding, etc.) (Clark, 1986, p67).

The remainder of Clark's essay attempts to trace the development of New Image through a consideration of the art historical conditions which led to the 'return' to figurative painting. Like its most forceful critical detractors, Clark's position is allied to that of Craig Owens, Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster in denouncing New Painting as reactionary, right wing, moribund and market-driven. He regards the 'new spirit' in painting as representative of a retrograde retreat into 're-mystification' and an attempt to 're-cast European modernism on an international level without excluding the American market'. Clark focuses specifically on the *New Spirit in Painting* exhibition before looking back to the emergence of the drive towards 'this new sensibility' in the writings of US art critic Harold Rosenberg. His final point, in a return to a consideration of Scottish painting, takes further Dickson's earlier comments about the way in which such developments had been packaged as 'Scottish':

The polemic of regionalism has become, instead of rediscovering the creative energies of the community, negating the art object and demystifying art, little more than evidence that art schools and exhibition organisers can spawn pedagogical monstrosities even more virtuoso than themselves. Commercialisation and acclaim have been put forward as the sole measure of success; according to the Third Eye Centre's handout, the main reason for the New Image Glasgow exhibition was to mark the phenomenon of recent Glasgow School of Art graduates 'winning high praise and high prices on both sides of the Atlantic'. Characteristics of locality, collective identity, sense of place, shared methods or imagery, proved so tempting as a literary device that they were actually lied about (Clark, 1986, p.71).

What is significant about both Dickson's and Clark's texts in relation to this research in particular is that their critique of the New Image phenomenon focused on the writing and interpretation that surrounded

---

<sup>96</sup> The reference here is clearly to Muriel Spark's satirical novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, in which Brodie, an Edinburgh schoolteacher and fascist sympathiser, refers to her favourite pupils as the 'crème-de-la-crème'. Indeed, in much of the essay Clark appears to accuse Moffat of a similar pedagogical approach, with Moffat cast as a villainous Svengali.

it. It was the claims made for New Image in writing which formed the basis of both artists' critical response. Likewise, it is relevant that it was the artists themselves, as opposed to external or professional critics, who were generating this debate. Writing of Moffat, Clark's final paragraph calls for 'the limits and directives prescribed by him for Glasgow' to be 'breached jointly, both by the productive forces that were set up to divide, and by the producers themselves, the artists' (Clark, 1986, p.73). There is a clear sense, then, that these artists – Currie, Dickson and Clark – were consciously avoiding the mediation of interpretation and art criticism, setting their own agenda and ensuring their voices were dominant in the debate. In *Polemics: Glasgow Painting Now*, Dickson revealed himself as a critical force to be reckoned with.

The tone and style of earlier writings in *Variant* and *Stigma* and even the magazines' deliberate 'amateur aesthetic' may have led to an underestimation of Dickson's critical prowess on the part of his opponents. The shock and outrage generated by his texts appears almost to lie in the fact that Dickson had (for many people) come out of 'nowhere' and lacked the official credentials of more established critics. But whatever its weaknesses, the text highlighted Dickson's rigour, careful attention to detail and rhetorical strength. The confident and belligerent tone of Dickson's text was extremely rare in Scottish criticism in the 1980s, outside writing in *Variant* and *Stigma*. Even Currie's text in Issue 72 seemed balanced and measured in tone when compared to his earlier student writings, and ended on an optimistic note whilst cautioning against 'knee-jerk' responses. In general, writing on art, even when polemical, tended to be respectful – negative criticism was usually implied rather than stated. As Currie has noted of his own and Dickson's texts for the *Edinburgh Review*: 'No-one was really ready for it because it was closely related to politics, and theoretical politics as well' (Currie, 2002). There was a sense, almost, that because the art world had finally acknowledged the presence of Scotland any internal debate or negative criticism which 'leaked out' might undermine the buoyancy of this new-found reputation. As I discussed in the previous chapter, this approach was in direct opposition to Moffat's understanding of criticism as something vital and necessary for the health and progress of contemporary art in Scotland. For Moffat, the fact that debates were taking place was almost as crucial as the subject, though it seems unlikely that he had anticipated being at the very heart of the fierce critical storm that ensued. In the following issue, rather than dying down, the debate continued through the publication of a raft of furious responses to Dickson's article. The outrage provoked by Dickson's

writing supports Currie's claim that 'no-one was ready' for the force of his polemics. In a review of Paul Johnson's 2003 book *Art: A New History* the writer Jeanette Winterson wrote:

Few of us nowadays trust politicians or newspapers. Not many of us believe in the objectivity of history. We have learned to question events past and present, with a cynicism that Ruskin, and his nineteenth-century contemporaries, would find bewilderingly painful (Winterson, 2003).

In the letters published in *Edinburgh Review* No.74, the response from the Scottish art world seems, similarly, to have found it 'bewilderingly painful' to be confronted by such cynicism and critical aggression. Three letters were published, along with a response by Dickson. The letters in response to the texts published in Issue 73 were similar in their central objections, namely, that far from being critical, Dickson in particular had attempted a 'character assassination' on Currie. Michael Donnelly's letter (Donnelly, 1986, pp.170-171), the longest and most detailed response, attributes Dickson's and Clark's 'jaundiced replies to Ken Currie's spirited manifesto' as being little more than sour grapes. More than anything, Donnelly's letter works hard to restore credibility to Currie's tarnished reputation by presenting his own account of 'the sequence of events leading to the inclusion of Ken Currie's work in the New Image Glasgow exhibition'. Rather than simply responding to Dickson's text, however, Donnelly's letter also reveals his own view of the New Image phenomenon, some of which tallies with Dickson's perspective. Firstly, he concedes that it is 'obvious that Alexander Moffat [...] invented the New Image Glasgow label' and adds that his attempt to present the six as a coherent group 'was a transparent fraud over which the six exhibiting artists had no control'.<sup>97</sup> Whilst this in part supports both Dickson's and Clark's view that Moffat was the 'svengali' of New Image, it ignores the evidence of Moffat's own essay 'Telling Stories', written for the *New Image Glasgow* catalogue which, as noted earlier, specifically states:

To imply that these six artists form a proper group, meeting regularly to discuss aesthetic projects, would be a mistake. All six have distinct creative personalities, and are bound together only in intense yet humorous rivalries. They did, of course, develop their individual aims and skills as students at Glasgow School of Art but whilst there, contrived to work in comparative isolation from each other [...] (Moffat, 1985, p.6).

---

<sup>97</sup> In terms of artistic 'control', however, Donnelly does not raise the possibility that any of the six artists could have withdrawn their work from the exhibition if they had been unhappy with the way it was framed by Moffat.



Donnelly's letter also assumes that the artists were too naive to understand how art and exhibitions functioned. Of all the artists, Currie in particular seems to have been extremely aware of how the art world, and the art market, operated, as his student writings for *Stigma* demonstrate. Donnelly's letter continues to champion Currie and to highlight 'the absence of a critical response to his work on the part of Waldemar Januszczak, 'the pundits of 'New Image' or the self-proclaimed champions of people's art at the Transmission Gallery'. (Donnelly, 1986, pp.170-171). The key issue for Donnelly, then, was not the critique of New Image, or of Moffat, but of the way in which Dickson made Currie 'the villain of the piece'. Clearly, however, whether or not Currie was 'the villain' it was Currie's own essay that was the catalyst for Dickson's response. Whilst Donnelly suggests Dickson has singled Currie out at random (and he suggests that there are more deserving targets in Campbell and Wiszniewski), in fact Dickson's text was a specific response to Currie's own essay. Donnelly takes it upon himself in the letter to attempt to explain Currie's position and accuses Dickson of having 'slanderosly misrepresented' his commitment to public art. One of the issues with Donnelly's letter is that the author does not reveal his own relationship to the artist as a commissioning patron on behalf of the People's Palace museum. Though he makes specific mention of the murals which had been commissioned, he fails to mention his own connection to this commission. Finally, he attempts to attack 'Messrs Dickson and Clark' through suggesting that their 'vindictive nonsense' emanated from Currie's 'failure to applaud the alleged achievements of Transmission Gallery', and further suggests that they had not visited the People's Palace to see Currie's work which was purchased 'before, during and after the miner's strike' (Donnelly, 1986,p.171).

The second letter, by J. O. Sullivan (Sullivan, 1986, pp.171-172), again accuses Dickson (perhaps not unreasonably) of having launched a 'virulent, personal attack on Currie' linked to the prices asked for his works (in Dickson's essay, the reasons for this are clear, and relate specifically to Currie's earlier *Stigma* exhibition review which adopts an identical critical position in terms of citing prices as evidence of lack of integrity). For Dickson, though, the attack on Transmission which followed could not be ignored. O'Sullivan goes on to compare Transmission to a 'privately run club for members only, something like the tattoo artist next door but without the colour', describing it as 'alien and uninviting'. Whilst Dickson makes some pertinent points in response to O'Sullivan's stereotypical assumption on what 'Joe Public' would or would not find interesting or valuable in Transmission exhibitions, it has to be acknowledged that, in the main, O'Sullivan may have been accurate in his view that many Transmission exhibitions

would not have been wholly accessible to an uninformed audience and may have seemed intimidating or alienating to (an admittedly ill-defined) 'general public'. However, in likening the gallery to 'a member's club' O'Sullivan unwittingly made a statement of fact. Transmission was (and is) a Committee for the Visual Arts rather than merely a gallery space and it operated through a membership system run by and largely for artists. Nevertheless, whilst praising 'some of the imported shows' (Eddie Chambers' *The Black Bastard as Cultural Icon* is mentioned), O'Sullivan reports that 'the home-grown shows which I have gatecrashed there have been without exception abstract to the point of insult to the general public' (O'Sullivan, 1986, pp.171-172).

The final letter, by Seona Robertson, again occupies a complex position. Whilst supportive of Currie (and largely written in defence of him against the 'personal spites', 'barely concealed envy', 'political myopia' and 'vitriol' of Dickson and Clark), Robertson, like Donnelly, highlights her view that the 'New Image tag' is 'fraudulent'. She adds, though, that the 'biggest fraud of all' 'is the fact that the artists (Currie and Howson excepted) have little to do with Glasgow.' A major point in Clark's essay and a minor one in Dickson's made the same point in that both writers questioned the use of the notion of Glasgow and 'Scottishness' as a way of representing Scottish 'New Painting'. Both saw the 'Glasgow' suffix to New Image as a cynical attempt to link the works with the international return to figuration whilst simultaneously suggesting that the Scottish works were both international and 'regional' and as such a distinctive manifestation of the mode. As such, Robertson's reiteration of the point appears somewhat obsolete in its attempt to reveal this so-called 'fraud'. Again, like the other respondents, Robertson points to Transmission as failing to offer a viable alternative to the works it supposedly condemned, advising Clark and Dickson that their articles (in a clear reference to *Stigma* and an explicit one to earlier texts published by Dickson and Clark) 'are better kept to student rags or the cyclostyled inky sheets produced by Transmission' (Robertson, 1986, p.172).

Unsurprisingly, Dickson responded in full (Dickson, 1986b, pp.172-175), adopting a by now typical mode of dealing with each and every criticism to an exhaustive degree even though he claimed that the responses lacked 'any sort of insight and intellectual observation (the prerequisites of criticism)'. Dickson's main concern was to defend the reputation of Transmission from the 'scorn' and 'insults' poured on its activities by the respondents and to ensure that his article was not read as being representative of the Transmission collective. In many respects, the text was less a simple defence or response and more an opportunity to expand further on the key issues raised in the previous essay.

Following a detailed and disdainful unpicking of each criticism raised by his opponents, Dickson pursued his analysis of Currie's work in greater depth but, again, much of this analysis lay in a questioning of the artist's position and approach as much as a consideration of the works themselves (in fact, no specific works are discussed by way of example). Noting that 'there is a very positive role for agit-prop and propagandist work, as in the art of Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper and in some work by Rasheed Araeen' whose work 'is tempered by their identity as black people living in Britain today', Dickson's contention appeared to lie in what he identified as Currie's self-appointed role as spokesperson or representative of a homogeneous 'working class'. Echoing Craig Owens' notion of the 'indignity of speaking for others', Dickson decried Currie's attempts to 'speak on behalf of a class which is depicted as a formless mass of socialised humanity', adding that 'the greatest drawback in his work is that he tries to fit reality into an ideological theory, as presented by the British Communist Party'. Currie has since sought to contextualise his association with Communism, particularly in relation to his approach as an artist in the 1980s:

I was an active Communist – I know it sounds horrific to say I was, you sound as though you're some kind of bogeyman, but it was not unreasonable to be a member of the Communist Party in the 1980s. It was seen as part of a process of making art accessible, making it more democratic and demystified so that people who weren't involved in high culture (as opposed to pop culture) could actually engage with serious art (Currie, 2002).<sup>98</sup>

In the text, though, Dickson's contrasting political position ('post-political' anarchism) was reiterated in his suggestion that such loyalty to 'outmoded revolutionary phraseology' is both anachronistic and dangerously sentimental, with the work acting as 'epitaphs to the bereavement of Red Clydeside's history'(Dickson, 1986b, p.174). Whilst such work was, for Dickson, 'moving in a sincere way' he cautioned that 'in the present [...] there is no room for, or an understanding of, a situation of plurality in culture and politics'. In terms of its thoughtful, reflective consideration of Currie's work, the text reads almost as an epilogue to the earlier essay and reads as a less provocative and more considered analysis. In a series of bullet-pointed questions, Dickson highlights what he regards as 'the positive aspects of Ken Currie's work' – 'that it throws up some pertinent questions concerning the class struggle and

---

<sup>98</sup> Currie was one of a number of prominent Glasgow School of Art graduates to have been an active member or supporter of the Communist Party. Alasdair Gray, for example, had completed a mural for the Scottish-Soviet Friendship Society in the 1950s.

concerning the function of art today' (Dickson, 1986b, p.174). Where the former essay was undoubtedly intended to antagonise and stir up debate, here Dickson's position is presented in more depth, and lacks the sarcasm and accusatory tone of the earlier piece. It is more contextual, setting Currie's work (and the 'New Painting' more broadly) against recent 'culturally-sited' works which, for Dickson, were more successful, resolved political and critical statements (he cites the work of Conrad Atkinson, John Latham, Stuart Brisley, Art-in-Ruins, the Artists Placement Group, feminist works by artists such as Susan Hiller and Mary Kelly and so on, many of whom were invited to exhibit at Transmission). Again, Dickson's position here reflects broader responses to neo-Expressionism and 'New Painting' internationally, such as Craig Owens' attempts to 'encourage and support cultural practices that challenge the authority of the dominant Fine Art tradition which marginalises work produced by members of subordinated groups'. Like Owens, Dickson's attack on New Image was an attempt to reveal what he saw as 'the conservatism of much of the most routinely praised art of the 1980s' (Watney, 1991, p.x).

Along with these attempts to situate and frame the works in relation to other approaches to contemporary art, Dickson also emphasised what he saw as a characteristic of New Image painting and which became a major criticism of the 'group'— its exclusion of women as both artists and subjects. In the context of 1980s British art, Dickson's question was salient when he asked: 'where were the issues of sexuality and identity in the New Image show? Why weren't any women included?' (Dickson, 1986b, p.174). These questions would be pursued by later writers such as the artist Ross Sinclair and art historian Hilary Robinson, who were similarly disenchanted with the dominance of the New Glasgow Boys in the representation and discussion of Scottish art. The issue of gender became a key feature of anti-New Image rhetoric and the questions were valid. Internationally, the backlash against neo-expressionism and new figuration (against pro neo-expressionist figures such as Donald Kuspit, Achille Bonito Oliva and Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton) had centred on its apparent anti-intellectualism and what was seen as an outmoded individualism and return to mythic subject matter on the part of the artists. In the pages of *Artscribe*, which would go on to champion New Image, for example, the critic and painter James Faure Walker was particularly scathing in his attack on the *New Spirit* exhibition before leaving the magazine. The New Image or 'New Spirit' critics particularly warned of the dangers of the works' close ties to the art market, and its seemingly anti-feminist stance. The work of women, for instance, was seen as having been notoriously marginalised, with Craig Owens in particular offering trenchant

criticism of 'pseudo Expressionism'.<sup>99</sup> The complete absence of female painters in the 38 'man' *New Spirit in Painting* exhibition and the exclusion of key figurative painters such as Elizabeth Murray and Maria Lassnig from major exhibitions became cases in point. Likewise, in Scotland, Glasgow-based painters such as Pat Douthwaite and Carole Gibbons had long painted in an expressive, figurative idiom but were never discussed in relation to the 'return' to figuration in the furore surrounding the 'New Painting'. In common with international manifestations of New Painting, the apparent exclusion of the 'new Glasgow Girls' from discussions of the new Glasgow Boys seemed to indicate that women painters had been excluded and marginalised from the discourse surrounding Scottish painting in the 1980s. Whilst undoubtedly the six New Image Glasgow painters (particularly Campbell, Wiszniewski, Currie and Howson) formed the focal point of media attention, other painters were gaining more exposure in their wake, such as Margaret Hunter, Helen Flockhart and Gwen Hardie. So, whilst the questions surrounding gender were crucial in relation to New Image they were also somewhat oversimplified. In terms of their opponents, for example, it could be argued that even in negative terms much New Image painting raised very timely questions surrounding gender and sexuality. In Peter Howson's work, for example, the most damning male stereotypes were represented, with working-class men frequently depicted as 'dossers', criminals, thugs and 'noble savages'. In contrast, Adrian Wiszniewski's work frequently represented fey, poetic, androgynous male figures in dreamy, halcyon settings whilst works such as *Attack of a Right Wing Nature* (1986) for example, seemed to present a parody of the current Tory/Republican backlash towards feminist and queer politics and their equation of nature with 'morality'. Most interestingly, the work of Steven Campbell, though not immediately or explicitly 'about' gender or sexuality, often alluded to contemporary postmodern critiques surrounding gendered representation (such as his inclusion of Michel Foucault as a protagonist in paintings of the mid-1980s). Likewise, for Currie, part of his stance as an 'artist who wrote about art' was an attempt to avoid the very associations with which many anti-New Image the painters were accused. When asked about his motivation to write about art, Currie explained:

---

<sup>99</sup> See, for example, Craig Owens 'Honor, Power, and the Love of Women,' *Art in America* 71 (January 1983), pp.7 - 13; Mira Schor, 'Appropriating Sexuality,' *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* 1, December 1986,; Benjamin Buchloh's 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,' *October* 16, Spring 1981, pp. 39 – 68 ;and Hal Foster's 'The Expressive Fallacy,' *Art in America* 71, January 1983, pp. 80 - 83, 137.

It was because there was a sense or an image of the dumb, male Scottish painter who didn't need to think or write – a very macho, drunken thing that had really been celebrated in certain circles. This was a kind of image – the painter that doesn't really need to think, the painter that works from these deep-seated wells of creativity which cannot be put into words. I was very mistrustful of that and I thought it was really important for painters to be articulate and try to do that difficult thing and explain what they were doing, how they were trying to make images, what the effect of those images was going to be. It was all part of my political beliefs (Currie, 2002).

Whilst revealing Currie's stance on gender, this quotation also reveals his perspective on the artist's obligation to his/her supposed audience – a view which was also at odds with Dickson's. In the text, the discussion of audience centred largely on Dickson's preference for new and emergent media forms as vehicles for politically engaged art, such as performance, film and expanded film. For Dickson, the expansion of media had simultaneously led to an expansion in the numbers of people creating art and responding to it (George Barber's scratch video would be a typical example of the work Dickson had in mind here, especially in terms of modes of exhibition and distribution). Dickson claimed that New Image had reasserted the notion of the viewer as a passive consumer of art, the work itself as an autonomous object (projecting its meaning 'out' and onto the audience) and 'the gallery as a church of art'. As such, his views were in line with similar 'anti-painting' and anti-Formalist critiques in the US, as mentioned, who equated painting with the worst excesses of late or High Modernism, tied to the Romanticism of writers such as Harold Rosenberg and the absolute Formalism and medium-specific purity of Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg. In contrast, photography, film, video and performance were seen (rather reductively perhaps) as left-leaning, potentially radical and democratic in terms of production and reception ('the trouble for dealers was that the expanded media mentioned above could not be packaged and sold as commodities'). Dickson further claimed that 'the role of the audience in many of these activities [film, performance, expanded film] became a self-conscious subject'(Dickson, 1986b, p.174). Similarly, he claimed that the activities of Transmission Gallery were 'unhampered by the need to play down to a supposed audience'. The text concludes with another reference to Currie and a rallying cry for what is 'most important' – the value of polemics, debate and criticism, described ideally as: 'an insistence on truth and non-falsification' and a situation in which 'people can come together in a

common bond, to freely discuss ideas and criticise one another's position without guilt or fear of one reprisal or another' (Dickson, 1986b, p.175).

The issues stirred up by the essays and correspondences in the *Edinburgh Review* remain some of the most frank, controversial and heated critical debates in Scottish art criticism. Not only did the texts offer a critique of the works themselves, but brought in a range of related concerns surrounding art world power structures, the function of polemics, the way in which art history and emergent directions in contemporary art can be shaped through curation and criticism, and so on. Again, in the context of this research it is significant that the dominant voices within these debates were those of practising artists who sought to offer a questioning, critical view of Scottish contemporary art on their own terms. The essays, republished in an anthology of texts written for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1995, represent a defining moment in Scottish art criticism. The texts divided the Scottish art scene, largely on political grounds, and remained the seminal writings on New Image for at least the following decade. Dickson's views in particular formed the basis for later anti-New Image positions taken up by a new generation of graduates of Glasgow School of Art, many of whom began to write on art for *Variant* and other publications in the early 1990s.<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> In 1988 a further article appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*, written by Paul Wood, then a lecturer at Edinburgh University. Currie has described the article, 'On Ken Currie: the dotage of authenticity', as 'damning' and claims that at that time he 'did not have the intellectual tools available to him to respond' to Wood's scholarly, theoretical analysis of his work (which, for example, cited Lacan). Whilst Currie was at the centre of much art criticism and polemical writing in the 1980s, he admits to 'withdrawing' after the publication of Wood's article (Currie, 2002). That Currie, as a writer and artist, was specifically targeted for criticism of the six New Image painters, highlights the power of critical writing as well as the problems inherent in practising artists engaging with critics in debates focusing on their own work.

## ***Alba***

Dickson's involvement with *Transmission*, coupled with his writing for the *Edinburgh Review*, meant that *Variant* did not appear again until 1987. Part of Dickson's impetus to revive *Variant* may well have been the appearance of a 'rival', Edinburgh-based visual arts magazine, *Alba*, launched shortly after the publication of the *Edinburgh Review* essays.

Like *Variant*, *Alba* remains as one of the most significant visual arts publications to have emerged from Scotland over the last two decades. The first issue of *Alba* was published in 1986 and the magazine ran until 1992, finally closing after experiencing similar obstacles to *Variant* in relation to funding. From the beginning *Alba* and *Variant* represented particular, often opposite, approaches. Malcolm Dickson's letter to *Alba*, which appeared in the first issue (in response to a notice sent to *Transmission* Gallery to announce its imminent publication) almost seems to 'draw up the battlelines' or at least highlight the differing objectives of the two publications (Dickson, 1986c).

Although this constitutes a simplistic analysis, in very general terms the Edinburgh-based *Alba* can be seen to have stood in line with a general perception of the capital's contemporary art: relatively speaking, it was viewed as the more established, staid and traditional magazine in contrast to Glasgow-based *Variant*'s 'Young Turk' approach (and these 'positions' stand in relation to the art produced out of each city at that time, as well as the criticism).<sup>101</sup> Where *Variant*'s first subtitle was 'A Radical Arts Magazine', *Alba* was the slightly reactionary Edinburgh equivalent (complete with, as Dickson wrote, (1986) 'representatives based in the major capitalist centres' and 'business advertising').<sup>102</sup> Several writers, however, contributed to both magazines simultaneously and the feeling seems to have been that, despite intellectual hostility and differing viewpoints, these differences contributed to a positive development in Scottish visual art, and it was precisely these contrasts which provided some of the most interesting and exciting visual art debates in Scotland's recent history.

---

<sup>101</sup> According to Alexander Moffat, until *Alba*, most critical writing activity has taken place in Glasgow, but incidentally, *Alba*'s editor, Peter Hill, was Glaswegian.

<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, this rivalry harks back to an era almost two centuries before in which two other arts magazines, the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly*, wrote from opposing political standpoints and the *Quarterly* was founded soon after the *Edinburgh Review* as a reaction against it.



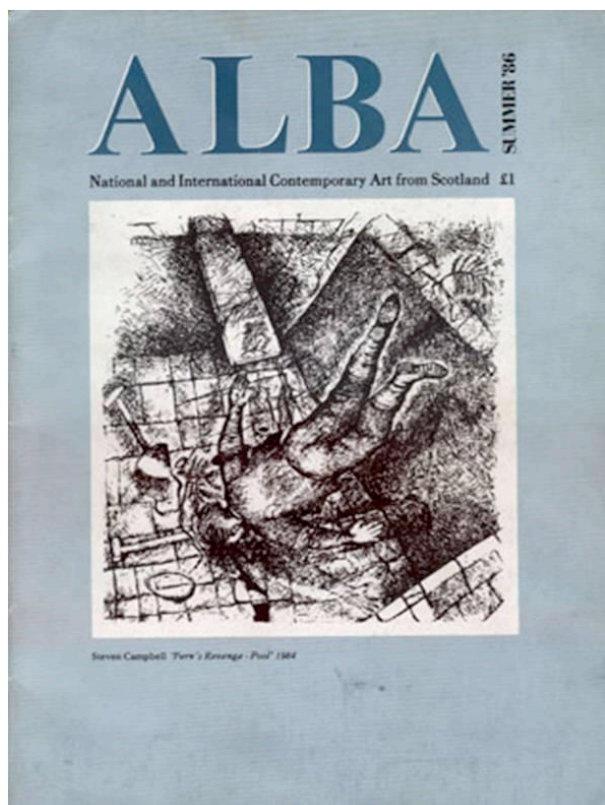
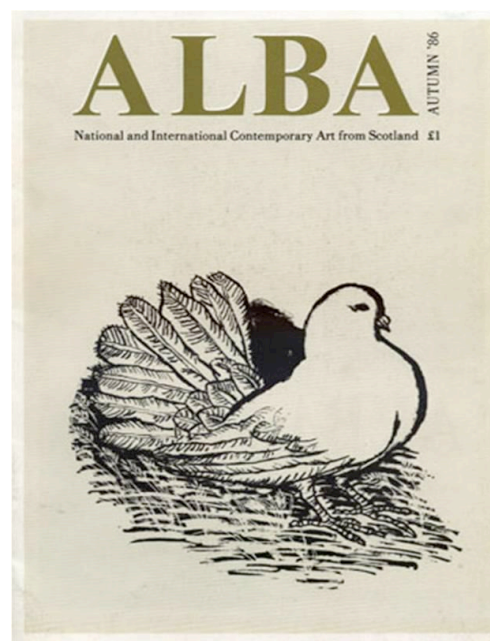


Fig.31 Cover of *Alba* (Summer, 1986)

Fig.32 Cover of *Alba* (Autumn, 1986)



Founded and edited by artist Peter Hill, the list of *Alba's* regular contributors gives an indication as to the content of the magazine (the contributors were described by Dickson in his letter as 'establishment-based critics').<sup>103</sup> These contributors included the *Herald* art journalist Clare Henry, the Talbot Rice Gallery's Bill Hare (the Talbot Rice Gallery acted as the headquarters of *Alba*) and art historians Euan MacArthur and Murdo Macdonald (though Macdonald published across a range of publications). Contributors outside Scotland included *Modern Painters* founder and editor Peter Fuller and the critic Donald Kuspit.<sup>104</sup> The lengthy editorial and advisory panels (many of whom were also regular contributors) included a list which reads like a *Who's Who* of Scottish art historians, whilst *Alba's* correspondents and commissioning editors based outside Scotland included ex-patriate Thomas Lawson (at this time editor of *Real Life* magazine in the USA) and, in London, Matthew Collings, then editor of

<sup>103</sup> *Alba* may well have taken this comment on board – in the second issue, immediately following publication of the letter, Dickson contributed a two-page article on 'The Georgiana Collection at the Third Eye Centre'.

<sup>104</sup> In Matthew Collings book *Blimey* he writes of Fuller 'In the last years of his life he was a very well known public figure, always on TV and in the papers. In those days he stood for a creepy kind of neo-Conservatism and was always going on about how good Prince Charles was. But when he first became widely known in the artworld, in the mid-70s, he was an energetic Marxist, always shouting and spitting in public art seminars against capitalism'. On this analysis, Fuller was in his 'creepy neo-Conservative years' when he contributed to *Alba*.

*Artscribe* and the relaunched *Artscribe*, *Artscribe International*. (*Artscribe*, along with *Art Monthly*, was cited by Moffat as one of *Alba*'s rival but role model publications).<sup>105</sup> Ostensibly, Hill's ambitions for *Alba* were an attempt to fill a gap within the critical writing sphere, and redress the imbalance which existed between visual arts criticism and the flourishing literary critical scene. As Moffat notes: '*Alba* was a labour of love for Pete. We were trying to establish Scotland as an international player, and we did quite well. I think we had more subscribers outside Scotland than in – lots in Australia and lots in England – I think people were genuinely interested in what was happening up here' (Moffat, 2002).

The critical 'bickering' between *Alba* and *Variant* looks, in retrospect, to have contributed to an increase in critical discourse on art generally in the 1980s – an active critical environment had finally developed after a period which had seen the veritable dearth of both Scottish-based critical writing and a complete shortage of outlets for the writers who were based here. For the two publications to stand in opposition to one another, representing different areas and aspects of Scottish contemporary art, simply served to encourage the very debate and discussion which had been lacking. The divisions between the two highlighted the diversity, rather than the weaknesses, of Scottish visual arts and culture.

One of the regrets for those involved with *Alba*, however, was the fact that they had anticipated a hungry audience of aspiring critics and writers who would clamour to submit but, as Moffat recalls:

It didn't work out that way. We thought *Alba* would give them a platform but we found ourselves commissioning young writers from all over the place other than Scotland. The *Alba* project did not bring on many new Scottish writers at the end of the day' (Moffat, 2002).

In contrast, *Variant* became an important 'first rung' for many new artist-writers in Scotland, particularly those who would go on to generate key debates in the early 1990s. From Issue 8 in 1990, for instance, artists such as Craig Richardson, Ross Sinclair and Douglas Gordon began to publish reviews and articles on the work of their peers. In Issue 8, for example, Richardson reviewed the Glasgow-wide public art project *Sites/Positions*, which featured the work of Douglas Gordon, Christine Borland and Euan Sutherland. In the subsequent issue Richardson wrote a feature interview on the Bellgrove Station

---

<sup>105</sup> At a book launch at Edinburgh College of Art on 26 November 2001 Matthew Collings acknowledged knowing Peter Hill and *Alba* but denied any formal involvement with the magazine, although he was listed as the Commissioning Editor for London throughout *Alba*'s six year history.

Billboard Project, which included work by Ross Sinclair. In issue 10 in 1991, Ross Sinclair reviewed the work of Mark Pawson whilst Douglas Gordon published an interview with Lawrence Wiener, and from this point until its closure in 1994, these young artists, many of whom who had succeeded Dickson and co. as members of the committee of Transmission Gallery, began to feature regularly as contributors to *Variant*.

In 1990 Hilary Robinson took over from Peter Hill as editor of *Alba*.<sup>106</sup> Whilst editing *Alba*, Robinson was working as a part-time lecturer at the Department of Historical and Critical Studies and the School of Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art (1987 - 1992) as well as working as Visual Arts Editor for *The List* (1990 - 91).<sup>107</sup> Unfortunately, after only two years, *Alba*, like *Variant*, had its SAC funding withdrawn and was forced to dissolve. The financial problems had, however, been 'on the cards' for some time. Alexander Moffat remembers: 'We lived in fear in *Alba* that we would go into deficit and that's what happened in the end, and as the board members of a limited company we were held responsible' (Moffat, 2002).

*Variant* returned in 1987 as a much more mature visual arts magazine than the more *Stigma*-like tone of issues 1 and 2.

The second issue was 1985 at the point which I got involved with Transmission so it took another two years before I decided to relaunch it with subscriptions from a few people. That was the beginning of a more serious attempt to make it regular (Dickson, 2002).

It may have seemed that the extensive coverage in the *Edinburgh Review*, followed by *Alba*, had exhausted the opportunities to fan the flames of the critical furore surrounding New Image, but the antagonism between Dickson and Currie continued in the pages of *Variant*. In Dickson's article 'Redundant Aesthetics and the Cult of Failure' in *Variant* No.3 further critical sideswipes were made on Currie's participation in exhibitions such as 'the multi-national Shell-sponsored Vigorous Imagination show' and his 'tenuous link with the art world' (Dickson, 1987a, pp.29-31). At the same time, however, further comments suggested that Dickson was attempting some sort of critical reconciliation with his

---

<sup>106</sup> Hill emigrated to Australia suddenly and Alexander Moffat believes the financial problems at *Alba* contributed to his decision to leave Scotland.

<sup>107</sup> During her time as a writer based in Scotland Robinson also wrote for magazines such as *Artscribe*, *Womens Art Magazine* (now *MAKE*) and *Art Monthly*, as well as writing several catalogue essays for the Third Eye Centre (such as her essay to accompany an exhibition of work by Jacki Parry) and several art historical articles (e.g. an essay on the Glasgow Girls in 1990). She has since gone on to write prolifically and now lectures at the University of Ulster in Belfast and has been a member of the editorial board for *N.Paradoxa* magazine since 1997.

observations surrounding Currie's 'commitment to public mural projects which might bring to public attention the lost struggles of the people's past'. But if reconciliation was sought by Dickson, Currie did not accept the invitation. Responding to Dickson's article, Currie submitted a letter which was published in full in the following issue of *Variant*, which documented his resentment over what he regarded as Dickson's attempts to 'rehabilitate me within your cult of failure' and his anger at the suggestion that 'I have somehow redeemed myself by working on a public commission in order to "counterbalance" my tenuous link with the art world'. Describing Dickson's article as 'beneath contempt' Currie, in what had by now become a familiar tit for tat pattern, responded by refuting each of Dickson's statements point-for-point (Currie, 1988, p.40).

When it reappeared in 1987, some of the editorial policies that Kravitz had attempted to introduce in early issues of the *Edinburgh Review* were realized in the relaunched *Variant*. In Kravitz's editorial for the *Edinburgh Review* 67/68, his intention had been to offer opportunities to both established voices and emerging critical writers:

That the notices section includes no reviewers' names is quite deliberate, so that the not-so-famous can demand as much attention as the famous and so mix on equal terms for once. The writing is the thing, not just the nod of the reader's head at a familiar by-line (Kravitz, 1984, p.3).

*Variant*, for its part, specifically encouraged writing by artists:

It was the notion of art as not a singular type of practice but a range of things. Artists had to be critics, they had to be writers, but they also had to be the audience too and it was all about the creation of a culture without mediation. We were trying to eliminate a 'secondariness' in the production, exhibition and writing of art' (Dickson, 2002).

Dickson's editorial in Issue 3 of *Variant* expressly invited artists' contributions, '*Variant* welcomes contributions such as articles, polemical writing and other items. It is keen to encourage artists to give critical evaluation to other artists' work [...]' (Dickson, 1987, p.3).

As I have highlighted, *Variant*'s ethos had always been 'DIY' – from its beginning no writer was afforded preferential treatment and, if anything, *Variant* favoured less-established writers, seeing its role as one of offering a platform for otherwise marginalised voices and in the early days of the magazine no writers were paid for their contributions. But as I will discuss further in this section, the notion of ownership or

authorship of texts became an increasing preoccupation for *Variant*. Where Kravitz had welcomed contributions 'whoever they are by and wherever they come from', *Variant* took this position to a more radical level in its experiments with plagiarism and so-called Neoist writing.

Whilst Situationism remained the prevailing theoretical and philosophical lynchpin of the magazine, from Issue 3, published in Autumn 1987, until the end of the 1980s *Variant* began to publish writing which not only reflected Situationist ideas in terms of theme, coverage and content, but sought to embed more recent radical ideas in the magazine through the style of writing and mode of delivery. According to an anonymous review in the Transmission Gallery newsletter, in the time between *Iconoclasm* and *War of Images* held in January 1986 Dickson had 'swapped Debordist for Foucauldian plagiarism'. Though oversimplified (and churlish in tone), the comment nevertheless identified a preoccupation for *Variant* (and Transmission) in the mid-to late 1980s. Specifically, certain texts in *Variant* began to embody ideas surrounding postmodern concepts of authorship and plagiarism in both form and style.

The diversity and complexity of the web of ideas, groups and organisations who could be identified as influential on the development of *Variant* in this period are so diffuse and numerous as to resist easy definition. Yet despite the difficulties inherent in identifying specific sources, *Variant* could nevertheless be seen from its beginning as belonging to a loose network of groups associated with Mail Art, Neoism, and post-punk/anarchist organisations (represented through publishers such as AK Press, political organisations such as Class War and punk groups such as Crass, whose graphics were featured in the *War of Images* exhibition). Where found imagery and appropriated graphics had been a feature of punk and post-punk graphics since the mid 1970s, found texts and the notion of appropriated writing were still in their infancy in terms of their application and deployment in writing on visual art. Clearly, there were precursors in terms of 'cut-up' techniques, literary experimentation in Dada and Surrealist journals and the use of textual fragments and citation in cultural criticism by earlier historical figures (Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is a key example), but the use of plagiarism as a specific political strategy designed to undermine the canon and to destabilise the concept of authorship had not been

encountered in Scottish art writing until *Variant*.<sup>108</sup> Notably, however, Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981) was a significant precursor to the use of plagiarism as a literary device within Scottish art criticism of the 1990s and appeared earlier than the 'appropriated texts' in *Variant*. Amongst a diverse selection of literary techniques *Lanark* included a 'Index of Plagiarism' in the Epilogue. Gray introduced the index by defining the 'three kinds of literary theft in this book: BLOCK PLAGIARISM, where someone else's work is printed as a distinct typographical unit, IMBEDDED PLAGIARISM, where stolen words are concealed within the body of the narrative, and DIFFUSE PLAGIARISM, where scenery, characters, actions or novel ideas have been stolen within the original words describing them...' (Gray, 1981).

Though particular catalysts for the experimental and stylised writing which began to feature in *Variant* from Issue 3 are difficult to pinpoint, a recurrent figure in both *Transmission* and *Variant* at this time was the artist/writer and self-professed 'Neoist' Stewart Home. A loose, international affiliation of individuals and ideas around Mail Art networks and post-punk politics, Neoism originated around the late 1970s and early 1980s through figures such as David Zack, Al Ackerman and Istvan Kantor in North America. Neoism and its ideas and strategies quickly spread to like-minded groups in Britain and Europe, with Home becoming a key participant in the UK. Home's own magazine, *Smile*, was first published in February 1984, though he had begun to investigate the concepts of plagiarism and 'collective pseudonyms' two years earlier through his London-based movement 'Generation Positive', through which he had called for all rock bands to use the name White Colours. From Issue 2 of Home's *Smile*, he had similarly called for all magazines to be titled *Smile*, generating a raft of *Smile* publications. Whilst *Variant* never attempted to adopt Neoist principles and devices to the degree of *Smile*, it nevertheless reflected many of Home's ideas, particularly in relation to the use of plagiarism and pseudonyms.

In the pages of *Smile* and the book, *The Assault on Culture*, Home emphasised what he saw as the critical potential of multiple names. In *Smile* No.8, published in November 1985, he attempted to explain his use of 'positive plagiarism' and the 'confusion surrounding [...] the authorship of my work' through a discussion of his use of the name Karen Eliot, the most frequently employed of several 'collective pseudonyms' devised by Home and others:

---

<sup>108</sup> It should be noted, however, that in creative writing there were several writers who had been featured in the *Edinburgh Review* who had begun to experiment with plagiarism, revisionist versions of classic texts and postmodernist parody and pastiche – see, for example, the writings of Kathy Acker, Liz Lochhead and Alasdair Gray.

The name Karen Eliot is a collective name. It is a name anyone can use – and many people do indeed use it. The purpose of having a number of people use the same name is to examine practically the philosophical question of individuality. It was such an interest in philosophical questions and their solution which led me to adopt the collective pseudonym Karen Eliot (Home, 1985, p.1).

In a British context, the use of multiple names or collective pseudonyms was particularly associated with and advocated by Home, though its origins lay in Dada and the historical avant-garde, which were frequently referenced by Dickson, Home and others.<sup>109</sup>

In relation to Home's connection with *Variant*, Malcolm Dickson has noted:

Stewart was doing *Smile* at the time I was on [Transmission] committee and corresponded with him then. The *Smile* that was influential was the one with the molotov cocktail on it. Stewart's stuff on the Situationists hit the right note (I had done my final year dissertation on the SI – 'Sterile Culture') and a lot of that went into his book *From Dada to Class War*. He also had some strong connections with Pete Horobin of the DATA Attic (whose flat I went to live in when I did my post-grad at Dundee). Stewart contributed to some early *Variants* [and] was part of *Desire in Ruins* which we put on at Transmission following a visit to them in London – they were *Art in Ruins* (Glyn Banks and Hannah Vowles), Stefan Szczelkun, Ed Baxter, Simon Dickason, Andy Hopton, and Stewart Home (Dickson, 2010).

As Dickson notes here, from around 1984 Home also had close links with Dundee-based Neoist Peter Horobin (also known variously as Peter Haining and, from 1990, Marshall Anderson). Horobin produced several issues of a magazine, also called *Smile*, and his DATA Attic project was an important platform for activities surrounding Mail Art networks.<sup>110</sup> The connections and relationships between the figures associated with Transmission and *Variant* and those involved in Home's and Horobin's projects are often

---

<sup>109</sup> The practices of artists such as Claude Cahun, Baroness Elsa (Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven) and Marcel Duchamp, for example, are key historical precursors in relation to the development of multiple identities, alter-egos and the attempt to undermine or 'play' with concepts of authorship and originality.

<sup>110</sup> For more on 'Monty Cantsin' and Horobin's Mail Art activities, see the article by Peter Haining, 'David Zack's Correspondence [sic] with Peter Horobin at [www.ccca.ca/c/writing/h/haining/zackd003t.html](http://www.ccca.ca/c/writing/h/haining/zackd003t.html)

interchangeable. Indeed, in the late 1980s *Variant* temporarily relocated to Dundee (at Horobin's DATA Attic) whilst Dickson completed his postgraduate degree at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art. Many of Home's books and related publications on the period make reference to the interconnectedness of figures such as Horobin, Dickson, William Clark, figures involved in the magazine *Here and Now* and further *Variant* artist-writers such as Peter Suchin, *Edinburgh Review* editor Peter Kravitz and Jenny Turner (who had previously written gonzo-esque literary criticism for the *Edinburgh Review* and went on to edit Home's novel *Pure Mania*).<sup>111</sup> Ironically, along with many other artists (particularly, in Britain, Stewart Home) Horobin's name became closely associated with the activities and writings of 'Karen Eliot'. As Home has noted:

In 1986, I shifted from doing performance to 'straight' gallery work (mainly installations) and started getting respectable reviews. As a consequence, a number of individuals active in the London art world began to treat the name Karen Eliot as being synonymous with me. I counteracted this tendency by using a variety of different names, as well as my legal and birth names [...] Such strategies are essential if multiple names are to remain 'open' and function for collective use (Home, 1991, p.5).

Other 'multiple names' which appeared in *Variant*, *Smile* and related publications and exhibitions included the names Bob Jones, the 'open pop-star' concept Monty Cantsin (invented by David Zack in 1977 and developed further by Graf Haufen and John Berndt) and Klaos Oldenburg. Along with the use of these multiple names, Home's own name also featured regularly in the list of contributors to *Variant*, *Here and Now* and other underground and counter-cultural Scottish publications.

Following 'her' appearance as an exhibitor in *Desire in Ruins*, 'Karen Eliot' became a regular contributor to *Variant* from 1987 onwards. Issue 3 included 'A Scottish Story' by Karen Eliot, which included a 'splintered curriculum vitae' of her/his work fast forwarded to 1993. In terms of its style, and authorship, the story bears a close resemblance to Stewart Home's fiction, particularly in its use of explicitly sexual imagery and references to drug use, though clearly an attempt to attribute the story to Home, Horobin, Dickson or any other *Variant* writer would defy the raison d'être of the 'collective

---

<sup>111</sup> See, for instance, Appendix 3 of Home's book *Neoism, Plagiarism and Praxis* which documents correspondence between Home and these figures throughout 1989 and Simon Ford's *The Realization and Suppression of the Situationist International: An Annotated Bibliography 1972 – 1992*.



pseudonym'. As well as the direct, practical experimentation with plagiarism and multiple names through 'creative' texts by Karen Eliot, *Variant* also discussed the impetus for employing plagiarism as an anti-capitalist, anti-Modernist device. In the same issue, for example, the 'Bob Jones' article 'Why Plagiarism?' introduced the idea of plagiarism as a radical critical strategy. The text centred on a discussion of its use within the visual arts, asserting the value of plagiarism as an act which could 'go beyond rhetoric' and the 'pseudo-negation of art'. Whilst sweeping, frequently unsubstantiated and often naive (for instance in its assumptions regarding art historical methods and its treatment of 'postmodern ideology' as a homogenous, unified 'whole'), the text is revealing in its critical intentions which are at once anti-Modernist (in highlighting the role of plagiarism as a critique of the notion of the individual 'genius' artist and the notion of a linear, teleological art historical trajectory) and anti-postmodernist (in attempting to differentiate between postmodern citation and plagiarism), as the following excerpt demonstrates:

Art must always emphasise the 'individuality' of ownership and creation. Plagiarism, by contrast, is rooted in social process, communality, and a recognition that society is far more than the sum of individuals (both past and present) who constitute it [...] Art itself is based on pictorial traditions built up over thousands of years, and yet art historians and critics always focus on the very minor, usually negligible, 'innovations' of each 'individual' artist (Jones, 1987, p.15).<sup>112</sup>

The division between Jones's notion of plagiarism and postmodern 'quotation' is nuanced. Indeed, plagiarism and postmodern citation are closely related in terms of strategy and intention, particularly in relation to their rejection of conventional art historical notions of ownership/authorship. Like appropriation, Jones's acknowledges that plagiarism operates variously by recomposing, 'sampling' and juxtaposing sometimes disparate sources in order to create a 'new' work 'which supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organisation of greater efficacy'. However, Jones's text also acts as a salient critique of the alleged criticality of postmodern appropriation, regarding it not as subversive, but simply as a 'transfer of ownership':

---

<sup>112</sup> Along with the attempt to define and champion the use of plagiarism, the text also highlights an awareness of broader theoretical and cultural shifts such as the emergent discourse around gender and sexuality in feminist and queer theory. In the observation that 'woman creates herself, not individually, but on the social level' Jones encapsulates the contemporary discussion of gender as socially constructed and culturally determined (as opposed to gender as a 'natural fact').

It is here, in the creation of new meanings, that we see most clearly the divergence between plagiarism and post-modern ideology. The plagiarist has no difficulty with meanings, reality, truth. The plagiarist sees no crisis of the sign – only the continual transformation of human relationships within a social context. When a post-modernist talks of plagiarism they call it ‘appropriation’ (transfer of ownership) in an attempt to maintain the ideological role of the artist (Jones, 1987, p.15).

For Jones, then, the proponents of postmodern appropriation (no artist is mentioned directly) are engaged in a cynical attempt to seduce the market with something which takes on the appearance of the politically radical but is in fact in thrall to the dictates and fads of the art world. As he/she notes:

As Capitalism sinks further into crisis, it becomes increasingly difficult for any ‘individual’ artist to exude an appearance of ‘originality’. Reacting to this ‘impossible’ situation the post-modernist takes on a ‘corporate’ image and ‘copyrights’ an ill-digested assortment of fragments. This is in direct contrast to the plagiarist who, rather than accepting this stasis, seeks to speed up the process of decay, and opposes both modernism and postmodernism [...](Jones, 1987, p.15).

What is significant about *Variant*'s interest in plagiarism and its efforts to define postmodernism is that this discussion was taking place within an art magazine, largely written by artists – in other words, these texts, however ‘unpolished’, offer a glimpse into the way in which practising artists outside the confines of academia and scholarly publishing were attempting to make sense of and position themselves in relation to a growing body of postmodern art theory. Also noteworthy is the fact that these discussions were taking place at the same time as, if not before, such ideas had truly entered the academy in terms of their dissemination to students and practitioners (in fact, many ‘classic’ postmodern and poststructuralist texts were only then becoming available and/or translated into English in this period). In *Variant* Issue 4, for example, a lengthy article by Peter Suchin was devoted to an attempt to demystify ‘the fashionable references to post-modernism which appear in visual art, architecture and philosophy areas’ and to ‘clarify the context out of which the term has arisen’ (Suchin, 1988, p.31). Again, *Variant*'s ambition and energy is highlighted through its attempt to engage with such debates before they had been ‘resolved’ and passed down. This again attests to Dickson's attempts to grapple with and publish an unmediated account of progressive ideas relating to contemporary art and culture in defiance of the

'trickle-down', digested and secondary modes of discussion common to conventional criticism and art journalism.

Issue 4 continued the direct expression and experimentation with multiple names through the publication of 'A Polish Story' by Karen Eliot (probably Peter Horobin). The text brought together fragments of creative prose detailing 'Karen's' day interspersed with an account of the events leading to the creation of Albrecht Dürer's *The Apocalypse*, 'the first book ever to be designed and published exclusively by an artist', and a discussion of the work of Andrzej Dudek Dürer, a Polish mail artist and visitor/participant to the DATA Attic and exhibitor at the Richard Demarco Gallery. Further texts by Eliot appeared in issues 5 and 6, including a text on 'Art Suicide', a discussion of the suicide Rachel Caine, an artist whose death was attributed to her hounding by the DHSS (described as 'intransigence and remorseless callousness') and her status as an 'unemployed' artist under Thatcher's government. Further in Issue 5, the writerly features more commonly associated with texts by Karen Eliot reappear in a feminist short story 'An Investigation' on the subject of a man's response to a (real) audio tape made by nine women artists, commissioned by Projects UK. Yet another Karen Eliot 'authored' story covered a further three pages of the magazine. 'A Balloonist's Story' was devoted to a creative account of 'Karen's' Mail Art activities (the distribution of VHS cassettes, badges, invitations, computer art) and his/her musings on art, the art world and art criticism. The text served as both a creative short story on the life of a Scottish artist with a day job as a balloonist for the DC Thomson comic *The Dandy*, and a description and loose analysis of Mail Art and related practices. At the same time, it recorded a typical 'day in the life' of an artist on the dole in the 1980s. In documenting the enthusiastic pursuit of alternative and counter-cultural practices of artists in Britain at this time, the story could equally be seen, in retrospect, as a snapshot of the resistance to the mainstream and the sheer determination to pursue a creative life shown by similar 'breadline' artists associated with *Variant* and *Transmission*:

Many of karen's [sic] friends on the dole occupied their time in very creative ways encompassing musical, visual and literate talents by making cassettes and small press productions to pass around in a free-flow of ideas that both stimulated and entertained. Of course none of this output challenged the established art world but it was more popular and accessible. This alone made it more important, stronger and more sincere (Eliot, 1988, p.41).

The conclusion of the story perhaps also acted as an allusive manifesto for *Variant's* view of its position as an art magazine:

With some annoyance karen eliot [sic] closed the glossy art mag. S/he had not read it all – a cursory browse had been enough to tell her/him that its contents were no different from any other. Articles and interviews supported by predictable photographic documentation were punctuated by the usual gallery and magazine ads. There was no mention of the kind of new artforms that Karen was interested in nor anything about the artists Karen personally knew. This sorry rag offered no variation. Karen tossed it into her/his waste bin with contempt (Eliot, 1988, p.41).

In this story, and 'A Neoist Story' in *Variant* issue 6, the 'real' artist-writer behind the Karen Eliot texts is most probably Peter Horobin. In 'A Balloonist's Story', 'karen eliot's' [sic] use of notebooks, her/his references to archiving and the collection of domestic detritus and the inclusion of specific times and dates relates to Horobin's own detailed recording of daily events at the DATA Attic. More obviously, in 'A Neoist Story', the central character is a 'Scottish Neoist' named Ho Robin. Much of the text concerns real activities and events such as the DATA Attic, the subcultural celebration/action *The Burning* (described as a 'serious criticism of certain aspects of postmodern culture' as well as a 'social event' Dickson and Gordon Muir were among many participants) and the Festival of Non-Participation, as well as name-checking figures such as the mail artist and *Variant* contributor Mark Pawson and John Berndt. The story was followed by photographs attributed to Pete Horobin. Overall, then, as well as being a serious attempt to examine the notions of authorship, attribution and provenance (and the Modernist notion of the individual 'genius' author/artist), the texts written under multiple names were as much about linguistic and semantic 'play' and an attempt to push art criticism to its limits in terms of stylisation as they were about a dismantling of concepts of originality and ownership.<sup>113</sup>

As ever, events at Transmission in this period reflected many of the themes and ideas explored in *Variant*. In particular, as Dickson has noted, the exhibitions *Desire in Ruins*, held in May 1987, along with the *Festival of Plagiarism*, held in 1989, were prime examples of the ways in which British artists

---

<sup>113</sup> In 1996 the *Guardian* art critic Jonathan Jones wrote an article called 'Who is Karen Eliot' which attempted to outline the activities and events attributed to Eliot and to investigate the phenomenon of the collective identity in relation to art. See, Jones, 'Who is Karen Eliot?'. *The Guardian*, Oct 23, 1996, p.10.

employed strategies such as the use of multiple names. Similarly, in Stewart Home's 1995 book *Neoism, Plagiarism and Praxis*, several statements relate to exhibitions and events held at Transmission in the late 1980s, including three texts to accompany the *Desire in Ruins* exhibition and further texts devoted to plagiarism and multiple names. These were directly linked to the *Festival of Plagiarism* events co-initiated by Home, including the *Fifth International Festival of Plagiarism*, which was held at Transmission Gallery in the summer of 1989, consisting of exhibitions, workshops, performances, films and presentations.

While, clearly, countless artists in the 1980s had examined Barthesian and Foucaultian notions of authorship and ownership (The 'Pictures' Generation, for example), the use of plagiarism as a critical intervention in these works, as I have suggested, seemed to go beyond the literal postmodern citation and appropriation of US artists such as Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, etc. Many of the artists (including Stewart Home 'as' Karen Eliot) who participated in the *Desire In Ruins* exhibition were informed by the legacy of British punk, Paris '68, Situationism and Fluxus rather than the dominant US trajectory represented in mainstream art journals which took their lead from the *October* and *Artforum* theorists. Whether or not the artists or works themselves were more critical than that of the US artists they set out to differentiate themselves from is debatable. As one of the participants and exhibitors, Ed Baxter's review of the *Festival of Plagiarism* in *Variant* No.5 was startlingly frank in its discussion of the failure of the events to engage a broader audience. To the magazine's credit Baxter's comments act as a critically reflective response to a set of ideas which, when visually manifested, were often confused, unresolved and veered perilously close to fairly hollow hyperbole, however laudable the intentions. In particular, Baxter discussed the contradictions inherent in engaging an undefined 'audience' and in encouraging open participation without condescension. As he noted:

It was naive, arrogant perhaps, to presuppose on the part of the audience(s) an analytical familiarity with the concept of plagiarism and a knowledge of diverse expressive vocabularies: without some sort of guide, the work – despite the 'anyone welcome' umbrella under which it appeared – often seemed off-putting. Only in a few instances was there any attempt to provide information which might have opened up the work. [...] *The Festival of Plagiarism* relied to a great extent on an unstated contradiction – that a 'radical' and 'politicised' body of semi-passive consumers existed (Baxter, 1988, p.26-30).

Whatever its failures, however, what remained unambiguous was the belief on the part of Home, Dickson, Horobin and co. that their approach (or at least their attempt) was more radical in its objectives than the now iconic examples of postmodern appropriation, especially their attempt to 'deny the distinction between producers and consumers'. At the same time as defending the use of multiple names, the artists' perception of the postmodernism was also revealed as Karen Eliot (Home) noted in the leaflet published to accompany *Desire in Ruins*:

Plagiarism is the negative point of a culture that finds its ideological justification in the 'unique'. Indeed, it is only through the creation of 'unique identities' that commodification can take place. [...] 'Postmodern appropriation' is very different to plagiarism. While postmodern theory falsely asserts that there is no longer any basic reality, the plagiarist recognises that power is always a reality in historical society. [...] (Eliot/Home, 1987, in Stephenson & McLauchlan, 2001, p.22).

As I have suggested, the leaflet set out to distance the intentions of the artists in *Desire in Ruins* with a broader understanding of 'postmodernism'. Along with Marxist theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, the group around *Desire in Ruins* regarded postmodernism as 'no more radical than its precursor, seeing it rather as "late Modernism"'. Both movements were simply stages in a single trajectory. Such developments reflect the establishment's ability to recuperate the actions and concepts which in the past threatened its very constitution' (Eliot/Home, 1987, in Stephenson & McLauchlan, 2001, p.22).

As I have suggested, Dickson and Home regarded *Smile* and *Variant* as belonging to a tradition of politically informed artists' writings going back to Dada. In the numerous texts written to accompany the *Festival of Plagiarism* (and in related pieces in *Variant*) Home makes specific reference to the writings of Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse) as an important model who had prefigured Modernist artists' 'discovery of collage'. Lautréamont's maxim 'Plagiarism is Necessary. Progress Implies It' was frequently taken up in *Variant*, the *Festival of Plagiarism* and elsewhere, and became the unofficial 'slogan' wherever plagiarism was used in this context. In *Smile* Issue 10, Home again discussed the motivation for the use of multiple names and explicitly cited Raoul Hausmann's writings as a key influence on the revival of the notion of a 'collective identity', and directly quoted a passage by Hausmann in *Courrier Dada*:

From today you will be President of the Christ Society Ltd, and recruit members. You must convince everyone that they too can be Christ, if they wish to be, on payment of fifty marks to your society (Hausman, 1920 in Home, 1987, p.2).

The text continued with an acknowledgement by Home regarding the origins of the multiple name:

With Hausmann, the multiple name once more emerged from the subterranean depths to which it had been excluded by the histories of 'great men'. We have been unable to trace any evidence of the use of multiple names between Hausmann's proposals of 1920 and the re-emergence of their use among correspondence artists in the 1970s (Home, 1987, p.3).

Another feature of *Variant*, related to ideas on plagiarism and citation and an aspect of the magazine's distinctive style and position as an alternative to mainstream art criticism, was the frequent use of quotes in place of 'original' or new writing. From its inception large sections were frequently given over to the publication of quotations, fragments and excerpts of existing texts (though the authors of the quoted passages were credited). As such, *Variant* prefigured later appropriative and post-critical strategies in Scottish art writing of the mid-1990s, but where later experiments with creative plagiarism and citation in Scottish art writing perhaps seemed anachronistic in terms of similar but earlier developments elsewhere, *Variant's* practical exploration of these literary strategies in the 1980s was contemporaneous with burgeoning theories on the appearance of such writerly experimentation in art criticism or 'art writing', such as Greg Ulmer's 1983 essay 'The Object of Post-Criticism' (Ulmer, 1983).

From Issue 1 onwards, Dickson had frequently included a plethora of quotes in place of, or in conjunction with an editorial which, presumably, were intended to reflect the tone and critical intentions of the magazine as a whole. In 'Notes on Discord', an article on the band Einsturzende Neubaten, written by Hazel McLaren in Issue 5, the text is broken up through the insertion of quotations by, amongst others, Michael Bakunin, Luigi Russolo (from the Futurist Manifesto), Hans Richter (on Art and Anti-Art) and Antonin Artaud. Though the authors of these quotes are credited in footnotes, no direct reference is made to the passages within the main article: they are simply 'dropped' into the text. In Issue 7, Dickson again included a page of editorial quotes. No introduction or discussion prefaced or followed the quotes – they were simply reproduced 'soundbites' by artists and writers as diverse as Peter Burger (in *Flash Art*), Raoul Vaneigem, Jon Savage, Adrian Henri, Susan Sontag, R. D. Laing, Terry Eagleton, Stewart Home and Paul Virillio. Further in the issue, Peter Suchin's 'Blend and Clash: Theories

of Distinction' similarly comprised the reproduction of sixty-five quotes across five pages, 'initially assembled as part of the material for an exhibition of both visual and written works [...] to attempt to problematize the reading of the show'. In the introduction to the quotes themselves, Suchin acknowledged that 'the widespread deployment of quotations and detailed references within novel works across a wide range of media' was 'a now fairly common sensibility within so-called Postmodern culture', adding that, in relation to Barthes, the quotes themselves could be read 'as being themselves accumulations of other quotations' (Suchin, 1989, p.14). In Issue 11, published in 1992, Dickson again published a page of editorial quotes along similar lines to those published in the very first issue.

Whilst Dickson in particular had often sought to address issues surrounding gender in relation to contemporary visual art practice and art world power (as evidenced in his criticisms of New Image, for example), he had rarely engaged specifically with the issues in terms of articles devoted to feminist discourse and for a long time *Variant* seemed to be dominated by male writers who were reluctant to pursue such debates 'on behalf of' others. Clearly, the adoption of pseudonyms in part attempted to destabilise the notion of the single 'male' author, and tentative attempts to replace the specifically male pronouns in texts demonstrated a willingness to engage with feminist enquiry. Dickson's commissioning of new writers in the late 1980s, however, increasingly revealed the magazine's interest in contemporary debates surrounding gender, sexuality and representation in a more direct, less allusive manner. Texts on pornography, technology erotica and the visual representation of women became a frequent theme in *Variant*, particularly from Issue 6 onwards. Lorna Waite was a regular writer on subjects such as 'Pornography and Eroticism' (in *Variant* Issue 6) and formed one of a number of contributors who discussed art and culture from a specifically feminist perspective.



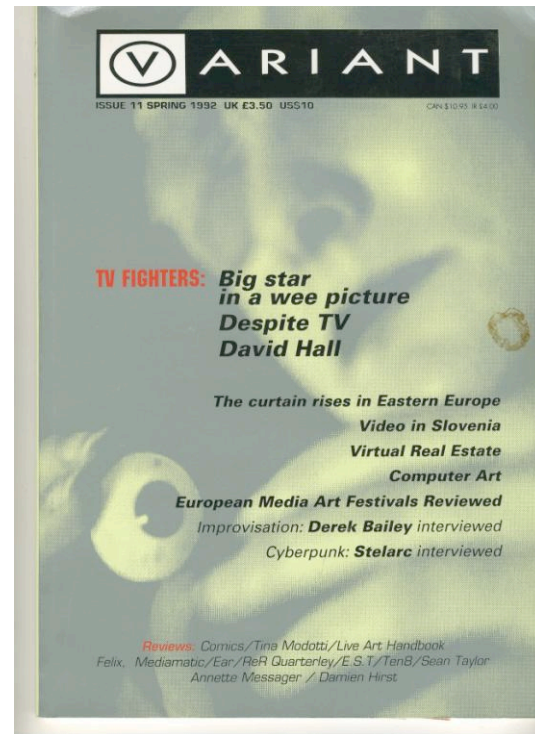


Fig.33 Cover of *Variant* (Number 7, 1989) [Photograph]

Fig.34 Cover of *Variant* (Issue 11, Spring 1992) [Photograph]

Whilst many Scottish artists dealt with related themes in the 1980s and 1990s, almost no criticism or debate was published in Scotland which concerned itself specifically with issues surrounding gendered representation, new feminist thought and queer theory in relation to visual culture. Hilary Robinson's later editorship of *Alba* addressed such gaps, but it was *Variant*, again, which pioneered such writing in terms of visual art criticism in Scotland. As ever, though, *Variant* frequently moved beyond polite discussions on the 'role' of the woman artist, dealing with controversial and often radical subjects, such as Moira Sweeney's review of 'Erotic Films by Women' in *Variant* Issue 7 which discussed 'the complexities of sexual desire' both in the works reviewed (by Carolee Schneeman, Karen Alder, Claudia Schillinger, Chantal Ackerman and others) and in the homoerotic work of filmmakers such as Isaac Julien, Cerith Wynn Evans and Kenneth Anger. Issue 9 continued *Variant's* focus on feminism and class issues with a lead feature by Jo Spence (who also featured on the cover). Subsequent issues pursued subjects on gender and sexuality, often focusing on photography, performance and film/video work. These included a further article on pornography ('Women's Art Practice/Man's Sex' by Naomi Salaman

in Issue 12, p.31), 'New Queer Cinema' (a review of a conference at the ICA on the work of Derek Jarman, Isaac Julien, Bruce La Bruce and Annie Sprinkle, amongst others, in 'Money Isn't Homophobic' by Ewan Morrison in Issue 13, p.60), an article on Cyberfeminism by Sadie Plant in issue 14 which referenced Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* and asked if technology 'was encoded in masculine terms' ('Beyond the Screens: Film, Cyberpunk and Cyberfeminism', Issue 14, p.12). In the same issue, *Variant* published an essay by Jean Fisher on the use of sound in the work of British women artists such as Susan Hiller, Sharon Morris and Alanna O'Kelly discussed in relation to the psychoanalytic theories of Hélène Cixous and Jacques Lacan. The penultimate issue again focused on the feminist theories of Sadie Plant and Donna Haraway in a discussion of gender and technology, again setting *Variant* up as progressive, forward thinking and critically aware of the key debates in contemporary art theory. Unlike *Alba*, who largely championed artists who had already established a critical and commercial reputation, and dealt with subjects on which there was some consensus, *Variant* was consistently more risk-taking. The psychologist Adam Phillips has spoken of 'nuisance value' – the usefulness of something which causes difficulties. *Variant's* contribution to Scottish art writing was in its ability to generate debate, to provoke discourse and to invite polemics. Where *Alba* reported on existing works and ideas, *Variant* challenged the status quo, critiqued received ideas and, echoing Sickert's comments on Ruskin, 'served to irritate and fix attention, where a more evenly judicial writer might have remained unread' (Gayford and Wright, 1998, p.xiii).

Another significant contribution made by *Variant* was its ability to generate an interest in critical writing as a practice amongst young artists. While Moffat had achieved modest success in encouraging his students to 'take up the pen', the majority of *Variant's* contributors were practising artists, many of whom had never before published their writing. From Issue 5, the list of contributors began to expand beyond the group who had dominated the magazine to this point. A far greater proportion of women writers were represented, along with an increasing number of young graduates and students from Glasgow School of Art and elsewhere. Of the seventeen contributors to Issue 5, for example, ten were practising artists. Of the remaining seven, four were writers who often exhibited alongside artists, such as Stewart Home and Ed Baxter, and two were pseudonyms (Alex Richards and Karen Eliot). Of the artists, Louise Scullion and Roderick Buchanan were both young, Glasgow-based artists whose work would come to prominence in the 1990s. From this point onwards, until its demise in 1994, *Variant*

continued to publish writing by both established academics, artists, writers and critics (such as Jo Spence, Sean Cubitt, Paul Wood, Sadie Plant) alongside texts by a new generation of Scottish artists including Douglas Gordon and, in particular, Ross Sinclair and Craig Richardson. (Some of these artist-writers would go on to supersede the New Image painters in terms of their international success and critical reception in the 1990s). Along with these contributors, *Variant* stalwarts and members of the original group around Transmission, the *Edinburgh Review*, *Stigma* and early issues of *Variant* continued to support and contribute to the magazine into the 1990s, such as William Clark, Peter Kravitz, Jenny Turner, Lorna Waite, Gordon Muir, Mark Pawson, *Here and Now* magazine's Alastair Dickson and Calum McIntyre.

As I have discussed, many early *Variant* and *Stigma* texts were manifesto-like in tone and style and in common with many early twentieth-century artists' publications, *Smile* and *Variant* were (initially at least) self-published, unmediated fanzines, providing an unexpurgated 'free press' for artists' writing, and regularly carried statements which read as manifestos. In *The Assault on Culture*, Home attempted to 'sketch':

[...] a tradition that runs from futurism to Class War, and that, from Lettrisme onwards it has – to date – remained (in English at least) largely unwritten. This discourse is a form of politico-cultural agitation and protest – and if a term is required to describe it, the word samizdat is more suitable than any of the conventional names. It is a dissident tradition, concerned with self-organisation [...] the vast majority of its texts are self-published (Home, 1988, p.102).

In terms of establishing a lineage for so-called 'experimental' artists' publications of the 1980s, whilst the British socio-political and cultural context of the decade underpinned both *Variant* and *Smile* (and both are very much a product of the era in this respect, manifested through groups and ideas surrounding, for example, Class War, King Mob, pro-Situationist and anarchist networks, Mail Art, etc.), the fact that Home and Dickson regularly referred to the historical and neo-avant-garde through a complex web of references to Dada, Lettrism, Situationism and Fluxus (and numerous offshoots and variants of these groups) demonstrates their awareness of the originators and precursors not only of the notion of 'multiple names' and issues surrounding authorship and authenticity but also of a broader tradition of what Home describes above as 'politico-cultural agitation and protest'. In Scotland, *Variant* was unique in publishing texts which reflected these ideas in the context of visual art and its stance was

nothing if not oppositional. Dickson's editorial decision to commission and indeed foster counter-cultural, radical and experimental writing alongside more conventional texts on visual art positioned *Variant* as a pioneer of post-critical and overtly stylised practices in art writing in a Scottish context. It also demonstrated *Variant's* desire to be regarded as an alternative platform for discussion, one which could offer a revisionist view of contemporary art practice in Scotland and would cover practices which fell outside traditional criticism and media hype. As well as this, the publication of such texts provided a rare record of such practices in Scotland and highlighted the complex array of networks and connections between Scottish counter-cultures and international groups such as Neoism.

Again, Home's comments on the nature and history of samizdat publishing and the impetus for 'cultural agitation' can be applied to *Variant*, and to the writings of Dickson and the group of artist-writers around *Variant/Transmission*, though it could be equally applied to earlier models such as *Rocket*. In particular, the activities around the magazine and gallery strongly support Home's notion of 'samizdat' publishing as a way of establishing a sense of identity. Similarly, his comments reveal that, with much self-published literature (or, in the case of *Variant*, literature which originated as such), the intended audience and the group to whom the writing is primarily addressed, are the peer group of the artists and writers themselves (as 'Karen Eliot's comments on art magazines, cited earlier, highlighted). Home has written:

Samizdat adherents find a sense of identity in their opposition to what is considered conventional by Western society. Shock tactics are often employed to help maintain a sense of differentiation [...] Everyone likes entertainment that panders to their own particular ideological beliefs, samizdat speaks to those who want it – and negatively to those who don't (Home, 1988, pp.104-5).

Home's comments undoubtedly reflect *Variant's* editorial policy in its early years. As *Variant* progressed, however, it sought a broader audience and its content reflected a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the magazine's place as part of a history of counter-culture and alternative culture in Scotland. Whilst never abandoning its anarchist roots, in the late 1980s and early 1990s *Variant* began to openly acknowledge its place in a broader Scottish 'anti-mainstream' tradition, with articles on Demarco-initiated events, commissioned texts by Cordelia Oliver, features on the work of George Wyllie and a piece on Alexander Trocchi's *Project Sigma* (and a discussion of his links to Situationism), amongst

others. The list of contributors also expanded beyond the close-knit group who had formed the mainstay of the magazine's content in its early years, with Dickson in particular becoming a key figure (as Moffat had been) in encouraging new writing by a younger generation of artists.

Along with its willingness to publish experimental texts and short stories, a notable editorial tendency in *Variant* throughout its existence (though particularly from around 1988 to its demise in 1994), as I have highlighted, was the magazine's commitment to a discussion of new media, performance and photography in an era which defined Scottish art as 'figurative painting' in terms of its international reputation and media coverage. Almost all of the work discussed in *Variant* was highly politicised and wholly representative of critical postmodernist practice in Britain and there was a sense that, had *Variant* not discussed this work (much of it ephemeral, time-based and transient), no record or critical response – certainly from a uniquely Scottish perspective – would have been preserved.

From the late 1980s *Variant* received much of its funding from the Scottish Arts Council (50 per cent from Issue 5) and, as always, certain conditions came with this public subsidy. *Variant's* reliance on this financial support meant that it was accountable to the Arts Council and therefore obliged to take advice from them regarding audience, format and distribution. In particular, the Arts Council advised *Variant* to 'smarten up' its appearance (Moffat, 2002). The move from stapled binding to proper 'spine', increases in page numbers and the introduction of full-colour transformed *Variant*, appearance-wise, into a glossy periodical yet the professionalised design seemed at odds with the magazine's ethos and radicalised content. From Issue 8, published in 1990, the 'samizdat' look of *Variant* had all but disappeared. In its place appeared a new logo, and a magazine which resembled more conventional art magazines, with clearly defined sections devoted to reviews, news and so on. In terms of content, whilst the list of contributors continued to expand, the ethos of the magazine remained. The subject matter, commissioning and coverage were consistently critical, oppositional, and sought to reflect art practices under-represented elsewhere. The political bias of the magazine was clearly leftist (if not so explicitly radical or anarchist) and it frequently became a forum for debate through letters and responses to reviews. In editorials, however, Dickson's unease with the increased backing of public funds was apparent. In Issue 9 much of the editorial is taken up with Dickson's concerns and he alludes to the 'great pressures to conform' whilst maintaining his stance that:

Shaking up complacency and providing a forum for the development of new strategies of cultural empowerment are as much the role of magazines as the areas they report upon. For those who prefer pose over position, fashion over critique, and a multitude of diversion over the present, it is not so cool to talk of independent media or of an alternative culture [...] There is no room for complacency and indifference: to evaluate that which you are partisan to means embracing conflicting viewpoints as well (Dickson, 1991, p.7).

In becoming (in the Arts Council's view) more 'visually appealing' *Variant* was forced to increase the cover price to pay for the more expensive production. The cost of the magazine to the reader rose from £1 to £3.50 in the space of four issues, and as such was beyond the budget of many artists in Scotland and risked alienating its core readership. Inevitably, when *Variant's* Arts Council funding was cut the magazine could not sustain these inflated costs and was forced to close in 1994.

*Variant's* influence on critical writing on contemporary visual art in Scotland should not be underestimated, particularly in terms of its explicit engagement with socio-political contexts and its commitment to a discussion of new and emerging 'new media'. The polemical, incisive and radical style of writing in *Variant*, combined with its willingness to publish experimental, overtly stylised and formally innovative texts, has not been equalled in Scottish art writing. Its impact was due to the indefatigable energy of the voices of young Scottish artists who had established their own forum for critical debate. When *Variant* finally closed in 1994 there was an outpouring of criticism for the SAC's decision to withdraw funding. Much of the correspondence relating to this was detailed and reproduced in the first copy of the relaunched version of *Variant* (Volume 2) in 1996, edited by Leigh French and former *Variant* contributor William Clark. As Alexander Moffat noted:

It was a tragedy when *Variant* disappeared. It had got to the point where it was almost beyond criticism. It had developed beyond its early anarchist years and had become a visual arts magazine with a uniquely Scottish voice (Moffat, 2002).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Into the '90s: Art Writing Beyond the Object

After the developments in critical writing activity in the 1980s, the closure of *Alba* in 1992 and *Variant* in 1994 seemed to predict another chasm for critical writing in Scotland. In terms of outlets and audiences for critical writing in Scotland, the ground was still shaky and, partly because of this, the status of criticism was precarious. The demise of *Variant* in particular, then, was greeted with alarm and dismay.<sup>114</sup>

Yet for the first time – in the twentieth century at least – the 1980s had paved the way for developments in the 1990s by having produced what could be regarded as a genuine ‘body’ of critical writing. Much of the discourse surrounding New Image painting in Scotland had been generated by critical writing. In the 1980s, then, the beginnings of a critical writing ‘scene’ for contemporary art had emerged in earnest. And because of the headway made in the 1980s – in both art and criticism – critical writing in Scotland was gradually being taken seriously both at home and abroad, not only as an exercise in advocacy for new directions in contemporary art (often regarded as the primary function of criticism prior to this period) but as an integral part of the art world itself. Whatever onlookers may have thought of his strategy, for example, it was largely as a result of Alexander Moffat’s critical framing of Ken Currie, Steven Campbell et al. that the careers of the Glasgow New Image painters were launched internationally. And as the differences, rather than connections, between the painters became clear it simultaneously became apparent that it was the critical and curatorial construction of these disparate painters as a Scottish school of neo-Realism, or the Scottish manifestation of the return to figuration, which had made them both critically ‘exportable’ on an international level and, undeniably, had aided their route into the market.

With the arrival and growth of magazines such as *Variant*, and the profile of Scottish-based artist-critics such as Moffat and Dickson becoming more influential in the '80s, critical writing as an activity began to take on a shape and identity of its own, beyond the flotsam and jetsam which had made up the bibliography of art criticism in Scotland in the decades leading up to this point. Along with the continued activity of critics and writers such as Cordelia Oliver, Alexander Moffat and Malcolm Dickson and William

---

<sup>114</sup> See, for example, the numerous letters published in the relaunched *Variant* in 1996.

Clark, a new generation of artist-writers came to prominence in 1990s Scotland, including Ross Sinclair, Craig Richardson, Douglas Gordon, Roderick Buchanan, Leigh French, John Beagles, Graham Ramsay and Ross Birrell, many initially through the encouragement of Malcolm Dickson in the pages of *Variant*, *Variant* Volume 2 (from 1996 onwards) and *Frieze*.<sup>115</sup>

Critical texts by writers based in Scotland began to appear in a broader range of publications, alongside the 'typical' spaces for criticism in magazines and journals. Along with galleries and related organisations, artists themselves increasingly recognised the value and potential of critical writing, perhaps again as a result of what had taken place in the 1980s. A key example of this recognition is the catalogue produced to accompany the *Windfall 91* exhibition. More than any other publication it seems to have captured the transitional moment of change for Scottish art in the early 1990s. The publication, perhaps more than the exhibition itself, marks the birth of a new generation of artists including Martin Boyce, Douglas Gordon, Christine Borland, Nathan Coley, Claire Barclay and Julie Roberts who would come to symbolise Scottish art after *New Image*, often due to their success through events such as the Turner Prize (Douglas Gordon won the prize in 1996, Christine Borland was a nominee in 1997) and through their representation in international exhibitions of so-called neo-conceptualism. The catalogue also, very self-consciously, aims to reframe the reputation of Scottish art in an international context, distancing this 'new work' from work of the 1980s generation of painters. I will come back to a consideration of the *Windfall 91* publication later in this chapter.

The recognition on the part of artists and institutions in the 1990s that critical writing had become an integral part of participation in the art world resulted in the rise of both the number and the status of catalogues, booklets and gallery texts. In addition, the pervasive 'anti-art magazine' stance within some art school departments in Scotland finally began to lose sway. At Glasgow School of Art, for example, a number of new staff members adopted new attitudes to criticism which stood in contrast to the suspicion of criticism held by tutors who doggedly believed in allowing the work 'to speak for itself'. In many respects the interest in publications and critical texts – and the sheer volume of them – can be

---

<sup>115</sup> Notably, all of these figures are male – women writers on Scottish art in the 1990s tended to be art historians, academics, journalists or curators. They include Clare Henry, Elizabeth Mahoney, Moira Jeffrey, Alice Bain, Nicola White, Roberta McGrath and Judith Findlay. Sam Ainsley was one of the few Scottish-based women artists to regularly write about art in the 1990s, though artists such as Newcastle-based Louise Wilson contributed to later issues of *Variant*.



seen as a kind of 'professionalization' of Scottish art and artists, hand-in-hand with the increasing emphasis on 'Professional Practice' in art schools.

Just as Moffat and fellow Glasgow School of Art staff such as Ray McKenzie, Steve Mulrine and Peter Seddon had both engaged in and encouraged critical writing amongst their students in the 1980s, staff such as Sam Ainsley, John Calcutt, Roger Palmer, David Harding and Pavel Büchler similarly fostered an interest in writing (as participants and/or readers) amongst their students in the 1990s. And whilst there were still many tutors (such as James Robertson) who strongly believed that criticism (and the reading of it in art magazines) should be wholly separate to the practice of making art – largely because of the view that magazines and the theories and styles they promoted were a corrupting influence on students' work, a kind of anti-intellectual take on Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' – the fact that other teaching staff now contributed to these magazines somewhat turned the tide of student opinion. Sam Ainsley, for example, wrote occasionally for *Art Monthly* and the feminist art magazine *MAKE*, whilst Pavel Büchler contributed to Edinburgh's *Portfolio* magazine and *Creative Camera*. Büchler, who was Head of Fine Art between 1992 and 1996, had a particular interest in the links and overlaps between writing, criticism and art practice. He was instrumental, along with the curator and critic Charles Esche, in establishing *Tramlines*, a series of booklets published by Tramway from 1994 onwards.

Along with studio staff in Fine Art, the Department of Historical and Critical Studies also played a significant role in encouraging both critical and creative writing amongst students. As Ray McKenzie has recalled:

Steve Mulrine was certainly a major force at this time and just before, but his influence was more on creative rather than critical writing. Liz Lochhead and Janice Galloway are the obvious examples, but there are lots of other lesser known but still very brilliant writers around for whom Steve was an early mentor (McKenzie, 2009).

In addition, Peter Kravitz, the former editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, and Hilary Robinson, editor of *Alba*, also taught in Historical and Critical Studies in the 1990s. The appointment of John Calcutt to the Department in the late 1980s, along with Ross Birrell and, briefly, Neil Mulholland in the late '90s, strengthened the support for critical writing as part of art practice in Glasgow. Their writing, along with that of Francis McKee, can be seen to characterise the 'literary turn' within Scottish art criticism which developed in the 1990s. In particular, broader trends in criticism can be seen in their approaches, such

as the adoption of a 'post-critical' mode of enquiry (in line with Ulmer's *The Object of Post-Criticism*) and the uses of citation and 'creative plagiarism' which moved away from the more politically motivated plagiarism of 1980s *Variant*. In some respects, an analysis of the key developments and directions within Scottish critical writing of the 1990s could act as a case study for broader, international debates which continue to question the role and function of criticism (for example, the perceived divide between criticism which carries explicit value judgments on the work it addresses, and looser, more allusive forms described both positively and pejoratively as 'artwriting').

The links between the establishment of new departments and disciplines in Scottish art education in the '80s and '90s and the types of art work deemed worthy of attention by artists and critics (often graduates of the Scottish art schools) are clearly evident. The focus on new media art in *Variant* from the early 1980s onwards, for example, coincided with the establishment of the School of Television and Imaging at Duncan of Jordanstone in 1984. Similarly, the work of graduates from the Environmental Art Department, established in 1986 at Glasgow School of Art, seemed to achieve an almost meteoric momentum throughout the 1990s. As this 'new generation' of artists became internationally renowned, their success simultaneously generated a body of critical writing which sought to track and discuss these post-New Image developments in Scotland. What is most pertinent, however, in the context of this research, is that the critical mass achieved by the so-called 'Scotia Nostra' was spearheaded by the artists themselves. Whilst in the 1980s Ken Currie had engaged in critical attempts to defend his own position as an artist associated with New Image painting, in the '90s younger artist-writers such as Ross Sinclair aimed to provide their own critical framework from the outset. According to Douglas Gordon, the kind of peer critique and attempt at critical autonomy on the part of his generation began at Glasgow School of Art: 'When my year started on the course, we didn't have a head of department. They gave us a course document that we were supposed to follow and we rejected it, wrote our own and followed it [...] Most of us were 19, straight from school, writing our own course document' (Gordon, 1991). Even as students, a number of artists studying in the department had embarked upon professional careers, exhibiting publicly at established and prestigious venues alongside their more transient and ephemeral public art and performance projects. In terms of a broader public consciousness of these developments, however, the 1991 *Windfall* exhibition – and particularly the catalogue produced to accompany it – acted as a kind of debutante ball for many of the Environmental Art graduates and marked their move into the rarefied circles of the international art world.

## *Windfall '91*

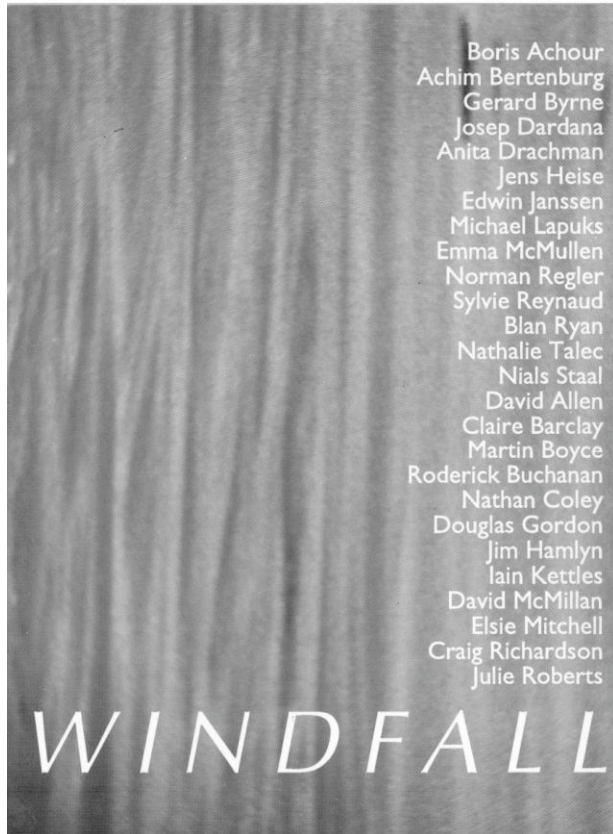


Fig.35 Cover of leaflet for *Windfall '91*, 1991

Where graduates of the painting department had become the most famous exports of the Scottish art world in the 1980s, the 1990s would be dominated by a group of artists who had graduated from the department of Environmental Art. In 1991, the year after their graduation (the first students to graduate from the department, which was founded in 1986), they organised a large-scale, international exhibition under the banner of *Windfall*. Glasgow was the third city to play host to the *Windfall* project, following earlier *Windfall* exhibitions in Hyde Park, London (1987) and Bremen (1989). The artists organising the Glasgow exhibition, however, set out to eclipse the earlier shows in terms of scale and ambition. The coordination of the event was led largely by Glasgow-based artist David McMillan, who had travelled in Europe in 1990 to identify artists who could contribute to the project. The exhibition was held in the former Seaman's Mission building which was due to be demolished later that year. Both the architecture and location of the Mission seem, in retrospect, to be characteristic of the identity and aesthetic

projected by many artist-run projects in the UK in the same era (i.e. disused, formerly industrial spaces such as warehouses). A huge, three-storey brick building, the Mission was situated on the edge of the Clyde on Glasgow's Broomielaw, east of the city centre and close to related spaces and studios such as Transmission. In line with the ethos of the teaching of the Environmental Art Department, site-specificity and context were central to the collective vision for the exhibition. The dictum of the Artist's Placement Group – 'the context is half the work' – had become the unofficial adage of Environmental Art students and the emphasis on context was writ large across the curatorial approach of *Windfall*. Along with the Glasgow-based artists who had initiated the project, the invited European artists had made work specifically for the spaces within the Seaman's Mission. All twenty-six artists had spent four weeks using the building as workshop and studio spaces prior to the public opening of *Windfall '91* in August. In the context of this research, however, it is the catalogue produced for the exhibition which is of most interest, heralding as it did the first of a new generation of artist-writers in the 1990s, and focusing on new directions in the style and attitude of contemporary Scottish art.<sup>116</sup>

The glossy, colourful catalogue produced to accompany *Windfall* was nothing if not attention-seeking. It *looked* impressive. This is significant for several reasons. Firstly, the quality and design aesthetic of the publication was strategic – it aimed to signify very clearly that this was an ambitious, important exhibition – a 'must-see' show. The catalogue became the distinctive element of the exhibition which allowed external art world figures to differentiate the *Windfall* project from the myriad other exhibitions organised by relatively 'unknown' artists, some of whom (such as Ross Sinclair) were still students. The catalogue form also fulfilled the traditional function of acting as publicity for the exhibition and gave the show itself an extended 'shelf-life'. For instance, for the international curators who were invited but could not attend, the catalogue existed as a kind of proxy exhibition (complete with images of each artist's work *in situ*) and a mission statement in the form of the catalogue essays. As I have discussed, the objectives of the Environmental Art Department, led by public artist David Harding, had typically centred on the contextual basis of art as an integral part of making work. Students were encouraged to undertake their own public art projects (examples from this period include the Bellgrove Billboard Project and Douglas Gordon's mural *Mute*) from conception to execution. Rather than focusing on the 'end product', as was the case in much studio teaching, the projects initiated by Environmental Art

---

<sup>116</sup> The *Windfall* project was also covered extensively in an article by Euan MacArthur in *Variant* Issue 9, 1991, pp.36 - 41.

students had to negotiate challenges inherent to public art practice, from finding spaces and obtaining permission. Typical challenges included liaising with planning authorities, fostering a dialogue or working collaboratively with communities in which works would be sited and abiding by health and safety regulations.

The *Windfall* catalogue acted as a key example of the initiative, drive and savvy of these artists. It is remarkable, in retrospect, to imagine many young artists today having the 'know-how' or being willing and/or able to fundraise on the level required for such a publication. Along with the substantial fundraising required to produce the catalogue, the artists commissioned the high-end design company Arefin & Arefin as graphic designers (the same company employed by *Frieze* magazine). One of the catalogue essays was co-written by a Glasgow-based Italian artist, Gianni Piacentini, and Cassiro Berdetti. The main essay was written by one of the exhibiting artists, Ross Sinclair, then a postgraduate student at Glasgow School of Art and a key participant in the *Windfall* '91 project.

## 'Bad Smells but no sign of the Corpse'



Fig.36 Installation view of *Windfall '91* (work by Martin Boyce)

'Bad Smells but no sign of the Corpse' was the first catalogue essay Sinclair had published (Sinclair, 1991). Following shorter pieces written for *Variant*, the essay was an impressive writing debut for an artist-writer then still a student. Unlike the 'typical' catalogue essay, Sinclair's text did not offer an artist-by-artist description of individual works. Nor did it address the specific art works or even the exhibition as a whole in any real depth. More than any other feature of the essay, the tone was manifesto-like, focusing particularly on two key points, firstly, the divide between regional and metropolitan centres of art and secondly, the choice available to artists to take responsibility for their own careers. Much of the essay sets out Sinclair's interest in and commitment to artist-run initiatives as a kind of 'alternative' career path or a conscious political choice for artists. Whilst *Windfall* is mentioned only briefly towards the end of the essay, it is clear that the central thesis of the text underpinned (for Sinclair at least) the curatorial and organisational approach of the exhibition. The opening paragraph acknowledges Sinclair's

awareness of what he describes as a 'renaissance' of 'non-gallery, gallery shows noticeably in London and Glasgow'. He adds that such shows are 'often housed in disused, industrial spaces or in temporarily dormant commercial office spaces. *Often they are initiated by artists*' (Sinclair, 1991). In the second paragraph Sinclair warms to this theme, succinctly detailing why such self-determination in relation to the exhibition and public display of work on the part of artists should be seen as significant:

Artist initiatives are a valuable way of demystifying the business of art. They promote a sharing of information, skills and experience while also nurturing relationships between artists which can often become fertile breeding grounds for a horizontal and organically developing infrastructure of cultural activity. They often embrace a desire to communicate with that great unfashionable and unknown quantity, the general public (Sinclair, 1991).

The bulwark of the essay builds on this observation by attempting to unpick and reflect critically upon the rise of such initiatives and organisations, particularly from the perspective of UK artists working outside of London. Sinclair's call for artists to 'cut out the middlemen' (curators, officials, critics) is optimistically expressed, as though the energy of his text might motivate and inspire other young artists to follow suit and take matters into their own hands. This sentiment, of course, was prefigured by Dickson in the 1980s, whose own motivation for starting *Variant*, as I have noted, was to develop an unmediated platform for the production and discussion of contemporary art and to avoid 'secondariness' through bypassing art world 'middlemen'. At the same time, however (perhaps in an effort to present the classic critical pairing of thesis/antithesis), Sinclair acknowledges the potential pitfalls and limitations of such strategies, and asks pertinent questions which still carry resonance today, especially regarding the 'real' motivations for grassroots or collective endeavours (for example, Sinclair asks: 'Do these kinds of exhibitions have any intrinsic value or do they only represent a limited window of opportunity on to the merry go round of the market for the individuals involved?').

Sinclair's concerns were and are well-founded – certainly, in a British context Glasgow has become known as the prototype for all collectively-networked art circles. Whilst Sinclair's identification of this shift may have been prescient, his misgivings ('to what ends?') regarding the rationale, drive and motivation for the acceleration of all things 'artist-run' also proved far-sighted. There is an ongoing perception in Scotland, for example, that the mere adoption of the term 'artist-led' comes with associations of leftist collectivism, mutual support and co-operation. This convenient mythology

pervades accounts of such developments despite the fact that recent history has revealed a very different pattern. Since the late 1990s it is increasingly apparent that once established, artist-run organisations often give way to wholly commercial enterprises (Glasgow-based examples include Switchspace, Mary Mary and the Modern Institute). Likewise, on the basis of the reputation and credibility offered by established committees and collectives, it would seem that many artist-run initiatives now attract members who see their short-term involvement as a fast-track route to an individual curatorial career, divorced of the contexts of the collectivist 'artist-run space'.

The reader of 'Bad Smells but no sign of the Corpse' in 1991, however, is left in no doubt about Sinclair's commitment to the necessity for artists to adopt a stance of autonomy and self-reliance – the point is writ large and hammered home and again reiterates a similar position expounded by *Variant* and *Transmission* in the mid-1980s. Following a series of questions regarding the role and function of artist-run initiatives Sinclair discusses the tendency for artists in Western culture (perpetuated recently by clichés and parody in the media) to be characterised as 'passive, distant (elitist) and politically impotent'. He adds to this by invoking, as Dickson had in his *Edinburgh Review* texts, the 'time honoured and persistent cliché of (male) artists toiling in garret studios (often by candlelight because they are too poor to pay the bills but in this equation; poverty = integrity). They are of course necessarily divorced from the world as it is.' The final sentence in this and the subsequent paragraph reads: 'they are waiting to be discovered' and (in the voice of a character from a recent advert) 'I want to be discovered' (Sinclair, 1991). Following these observations, Sinclair concisely summarises and repeats his most important points, referring back to the Prudential advert featuring the 'undiscovered artist':

This advertisement projects an assumption that artists, particularly women artists, are always at the mercy of some external forces and therefore unable to organise themselves into any relevant or meaningful situations. The subtext of the ad. revealed by the artists accent further proposes that "regional art" exists only when appropriated and approved by the centre and reveals the basic assumption that it is disenfranchised, marginal and ultimately of no value whatsoever within its own social context (if indeed it is of any value outside of that situation). It is thus defined through the mechanics of the Metropolis as inferior to cultural activity which takes place at the centre (Sinclair, 1991).



Sinclair's most crucial point, then, reiterated repeatedly, is that artists should no longer buy into these stereotypes. Rather than waiting and wanting to be discovered, artists should take responsibility and claim ownership for the routes their careers will take. In relation to the perceived division between the centre and the margin/periphery (in terms of centres of art) much of what Sinclair discusses is an adaptation of Raymond Williams' basic thesis in his 1975 book *The Country and the City* applied to the contemporary art world in Britain in the 1990s (crudely, that the 'centre' or city is the main space of cultural production: when 'culture' is produced elsewhere it achieves meaning and significance only through the validation and value bestowed on it by representatives of the centre). Sinclair, then, equates the centralisation of the art world in the UK with a kind of cultural imperialism in which only London (i.e. London-based gallerists, curators, institutions and critics) can decide what is/is not worthy of attention.<sup>117</sup>

Of course any artists with any meaningful contribution to make do not sit around waiting to be discovered in quite the way represented [...] but this preconception does persist and you know if you are told something often enough maybe you start to believe it. Often artists conspire to their own marginalisation by accepting projected views of the parameters of cultural activity, particularly in regional areas and of course by accepting and patronising the cultural hegemony enforced from the metropolitan centre (Sinclair, 1991).

As well his discussion of timely concerns in British contemporary art, the style and approach of the essay are revealing. Sinclair's language, for example, becomes increasingly energetic and rambunctious as the essay develops. The style and type of language he chooses in this essay become a kind of trademark of Sinclair's writing. In some respects, this is again, identifiably, the criticism of a young man, and parallels can be drawn between Sinclair's tone and style of delivery and that of Malcolm Dickson at a similar point in his career. The use of occasional expletives, for example, is notable in Dickson's essays of the early '80s and Sinclair's of the early to mid-90s. The use of such loaded language seems to perform several functions, other than being purely emphatic. As well as the punch delivered by phrases such as 'you've

---

<sup>117</sup> Sinclair may overstate the case here, perhaps consciously so, for emphasis, yet there are undoubtedly many – both likely and unlikely – candidates who still adhere to these 'assumptions'. Classic examples include Brian Sewell's metrocentric response to the opening of the *COBRA* exhibition in 2003 at Baltic in Gateshead, in which he described Tyneside as 'totally unimportant', and the 'shock and awe' with which Glasgow's nomination as Capital of Culture was met in 1990, both from London and Edinburgh.

fuckin' had it', (in relation to the pressure on artists to succeed at a young age) and further terms such as 'couldn't give a flying fuck' the very particular terminology used here (and again, in later essays) appeals to a kind of youth-speak and 'cool', an attempt on the part of the writer to ally himself (and identify with) a particular demographic.<sup>118</sup> Along with these rhetorical devices, Sinclair's use of 'street' slang and informal US abbreviation (suffixing 'n' for 'ing', for instance) is another very deliberate attempt to convey a sense of irreverence towards the conventions of the art catalogue essay – the message here is, 'this essay is different – take notice'. Similar strategies and a related use of language employed to similar ends can be seen in later Scottish art criticism from the mid-1990s onwards, particularly in essays and reviews by artists and critics such as John Beagles and John Calcutt, but traces of a similar attitude and style can again be seen in earlier writings, especially by Malcolm Dickson. The legacy of the informality and subjectivity of gonzo journalism can again be seen here, and in the British music and style press this kind of writing was at its height (in, for example, publications such as *Melody Maker*, *Sounds* and *NME*).

Another example of the links between Sinclair and Dickson's style and use of language is the way in which Sinclair addresses the reader specifically, rejecting the polished critical distance of a third-person narrative. Personal pronouns appear increasingly as Sinclair adopts an oratorical manner of writing. Addressing his readership as 'you' and speaking of 'us', he attempts to speak directly to his audience – presumably fellow artists at similar points in their career. Whilst this literary strategy undoubtedly packs a rhetorical punch, it is also clear that the catalogue was intended as much, if not more, for the consumption of international curators, art world worthies and critics (perhaps the 'ex public schoolboys' mentioned below) as it was for the early career artists and students Sinclair purported to address:

So where does all this leave you, the young artist just out of art school in Glasgow or Liverpool, Belfast or Hull? When you're standing at the top of the steps of your college, 20 years of education behind you, is the only way really down? ... Well, it is if all you are going to do is retreat to your bedroom/studio for 10 years piling up the canvases while you 'wait to be discovered'. [...] Why wait for your work to be approved/validated/confirmed by some ex public

---

<sup>118</sup> It should be noted, however, that critics including David Sylvester had also employed the use of slang words or phrases in their writing from time to time. In Sylvester's case, like the artist-critics mentioned above, the injection of such language could be seen as a way for the writer to refocus the reader's attention or engagement with difficult works or ideas.

schoolboy in a sharp suit/jeans'n sneakers? (but maybe you know him already from prep school). You get out there, do some fucking hot shows and invite them over on your own terms (Sinclair, 1991).

This kind of delivery again emphasises the manifesto-like tone of the text; on the one hand Sinclair rallies part of his audience directly (his peers) whilst on the other hand he clearly lays out his terms, attitude and philosophy for the remainder of his readership.

Further in the essay Sinclair describes artist-initiated projects as 'the impatient and aggressive rejection of the perceived notion of the artist as passive and apolitical'. The essay (and catalogue), as well as the *Windfall* exhibition itself, are examples of this 'impatient and aggressive rejection' and Sinclair's definition aptly describes his own writing. The language and style of the piece are nothing if not 'impatient and aggressive' in terms of the energy, enthusiasm and frustration expressed. As well as a bold and confident 'mission statement' directed at curators, critics, galleries and so on, the text acts as a kind of 'chivvying' of fellow artists, an attempt to goad young artists out of apathy and complacency in relation to their position and role within the infrastructure of the art world. Whilst texts such as those in *Stigma* were equally aggressive and energised, the economic and political situation for the UK and Glasgow had changed almost unrecognisably in the intervening decade. Dickson's stance leaned towards a self-conscious 'opting out' of the officialdom and acceptance of the fashionable art world, a defiant refusal to participate in an authorised system. Other essays discussed (as I have mentioned) the inevitability of unemployment post-art school, and attempted to reframe this situation by inversion, perhaps seeing unemployment as another form of resistance and artistic autonomy. These texts, however, were written before the meteoric success of some of Dickson's peers. Whilst the success of New Image did little to alter Dickson's political sentiments, it is undeniably the case that whatever Sinclair's position, and whatever his view of both the work and the career paths of the 1980s painters, the success of his predecessors undoubtedly put Glasgow 'on the art world map'. Prior to the '80s', it was almost unthinkable to imagine coverage and critique of Scottish art on the scale which occurred through the attention paid to Ken Currie, Steven Campbell, et al.

It seems very likely that many of Sinclair's statements about artists' attempts to seek validation from the outside were directed at the painters of the 1980s – it was well-known and widely discussed that Ken Currie and Steven Campbell had achieved commercial success in London and New York. What Sinclair

does not discuss is the fact that the initial success of New Image was not down to external forces and approval from outside, but had been forged through the home-grown efforts of their tutor (and, lest we forget) fellow artist Alexander Moffat. Though the contexts are clearly different in many ways, it was nevertheless Moffat's own 'artist's initiative' (in taking on the role of critic and curator – much like Sinclair himself) which 'launched' the careers of the New Glasgow Boys. Furthermore, due either to Moffat's savvy observance of art world trends or pure serendipity, New Image arrived (as I have discussed in the previous chapter) just as figurative painting was enjoying a major revival internationally. The time may not have been right when the SAC attempted to do a similar thing in promoting Moffat and his contemporaries as New Realists in the 1970s, but by the early 1980s Moffat must have seen (consciously or not) an opportunity to promote his vision and philosophy of what contemporary art could be (and the social function it should employ) through the work of his students.

In retrospect, it is interesting to note that Sinclair's own generation followed suit in many ways. Whatever their differences or even intentions, the aesthetic at play in the work of Sinclair and his contemporaries and the approaches adopted by the *Windfall* group were very much 'of the moment' in terms of new directions in contemporary art (Neil Mulholland has discussed this in detail in numerous essays and in his 2003 book *The Cultural Devolution*). For a group as self-reflexive and critically aware as these young artists, it seems naive to assume they were unaware of where their work might 'fit' in terms of the tastes and directions of the international art world (and market). Furthermore, whilst Sinclair and his associates perhaps generated interest in their work 'on their own terms' in the first instance, it would be stretching the point to equate an initial sense of self-determination and self-reliance on the part of young artists with ongoing artistic autonomy and steadfast political integrity (at least with regard to the machinations of the art world). Many of the artists, for example, were quickly 'snapped up' by London galleries such as the Lisson. And whilst Sinclair et al may have invited these galleries and curators to projects like *Windfall* 'on their own terms' they were nevertheless quickly co-opted into the art market and the traditional systems of art. Similarly, like the New Image group, as Neil Mulholland has observed, the very particular contexts, regional nuances and political messages of the early works (the most interesting elements of the work in many ways) of these artists were often subsumed into an easily translatable version of 'Scottishness' which could be easily understood in an international marketplace.

To return to the essay's style and delivery specifically, many of the points Sinclair raises are presented as almost binary oppositions, with rhetorical questions frequently posed as an 'either/or' dichotomy. In this, there is a sense that some of the questions Sinclair asks are unresolved (or unresolvable), even where the reader can guess which half of these oppositional 'sets' Sinclair privileges.

Events of this nature which occur outside London have the added (dis)advantage of being forced to justify themselves as something other than a regional showroom for the 'jaded palates of the metropolitan centre.' Do these kinds of exhibitions have any intrinsic meaning or do they only represent a limited window of opportunity onto the merry go round of the market for those individuals involved? Certainly they represent a valuable and energetic self-determination, but to what ends? Is this situation merely symptomatic of the old guard being replaced by the avant-garde, the establishment vs. the new establishment?

Are these kinds of show only regional showrooms for the hungry market or do they slowly build an international awareness of any given city which could prove to be to everyone's benefit? Are notions of increased value and engagement through site-specificity and claims of greater public accessibility only excuses to placate (public) funders? Artists gain valuable experience by getting involved in all aspects of initiating/funding/curating/administrating, but why then do the public still feel alienated and excluded where every effort is made to engage them? (Sinclair, 1991).

As the above quote demonstrates, Sinclair's mode of engagement can be rather bombastic in tone, perhaps leaning towards rhetoric. Certainly, there is a sense of Sinclair positioning himself as a kind of spokesman or politician representing the values and approaches of himself and his peers. Yet in spite of the didacticism of the essay there are also elements of discursiveness and self-reflexivity that leave room for the reader to become 'active'. And it is perhaps this element – the confidence to raise questions and posit strategies without presenting 'absolutes' – which makes Sinclair's essay arguably more critically sophisticated than that of his '80s counterparts. It is interesting to note, though, that despite the essay's clear attempt to distance itself from the artists associated with New Image there are undoubtedly parallels to be drawn between the clarion-call didacticism of essays by Ken Currie in the early '80s and Sinclair's own attempt to rally young artists according to a new agenda. Sinclair's essay carries identifiable 'swipes' at the New Image painters and much of the essay seems designed to

establish some distance between the new generation of artists (represented by the Glasgow contingent of the *Windfall* exhibition) and their predecessors.

What has finally been exorcised is a feeling evident in years gone by that coming from Glasgow, or Belfast or any other city meant having a chip on your shoulder, feeling short changed because you weren't born in London or New York. What is happening now is active – not re-active (Sinclair, 1991).

In the *Windfall* catalogue such is Sinclair's attempt to highlight the 'gulf' between the different 'types' of artists – and it is clear that the representatives Sinclair has in mind are 'old school' expressive/figurative painters versus his own peer group – that he inadvertently undermines his position by leaving gaps in his discussion and ignoring salient nuances, particularly in terms of acknowledging some affinity between the two groups. In an attempt to summarise the period, the *Visiting Arts* website discussed the apparent 'divide' between the Glasgow-based artists of the 1980s and 1990s, noting of the younger group:

[Their] aim is to foster a different, more holistic type of creativity from that required by studio- and gallery-based work – and one which demands, centrally, close and active engagement with the physical and human fabric in which the artwork is sited, hence revealing an underlying ideological affinity with the social engagement of Currie, Howson *et al*, despite their radical disparity of method (Wilson and Pilgrim, 2007).

As the quote highlights, despite major differences (particularly with regard to the style and form of the art works produced) the artists and writers of the 1980s and 1990s had more in common than either side would like to admit. Both Moffat and Currie in their writings on *New Image*, and in Sinclair's discussion (here and in subsequent essays) of the rise of his own generation, there is, first and foremost, an attempt to historicise and critically frame a given group of artists. Similarly, there is a sense that both bodies of writing attempt to pre-empt and counter criticism before it appears (Sinclair and Currie, for example, adopt a rather defensive tone which seeks to justify and provide a rationale for their artistic philosophies). And again, in Moffat's essay for *New Image Glasgow*, Currie's essay for the *Edinburgh Review* and Sinclair's *Windfall* essay (and other writings of the early '90s) the examples employed are as revealing as the gaps. In all of the essays, the histories and arguments presented are highly selective, designed to persuade. History, in all of these cases, is neatly packaged to support the key points of the writing. In Sinclair's case, he presents self-determination and a desire for curatorial and critical

autonomy as though his generation had invented such approaches. Admittedly, he acknowledges the rise of a particular type of artist-run initiatives, but even here he woefully ignores the efforts of like-minded artists in Scotland with its strong tradition of artist-run projects and organisations (such as WASPS, Dovecote, New 57 Gallery, Demarco-initiated events, the Seagate Gallery, Glasgow Group, ABBO, Edinburgh Printmakers, Glasgow Print Studio and so on). Unlike Currie and Moffat, he fails to cite historical examples or precursors in terms of artists 'cutting out the middlemen' and refusing to wait to be discovered (Blake, Courbet and so on). In doing so, Sinclair, perhaps unwittingly, colludes in the recent, selective histories of the phenomenon of artist-run initiatives as being something pioneered by today's generation of successful artists (Glasgow in particular suffers from this reductive understanding of the infrastructure of Scottish art since the early 1990s).

In spite of its limitations (notably, the lack of a historical framework and the implicit suggestion that recent artist-run initiatives have been spearheaded by Sinclair's group and their counterparts elsewhere), the *Windfall* essay is nonetheless accurate in terms of identifying these developments as a new shift or transition in the *types* of projects organised by artists (i.e. site- or context-specific; dealing with public space; typified by the use of 'alternative', non-art spaces, etc.). And the essay hints that, in theory at least, such developments can be entrepreneurial in spirit. It also highlights that while collective effort and co-operation amongst artists can be valuable, such 'team spirit' might also mask a rampant individualism that sees power in numbers. Through his careful presentation of the argument, it seems clear that in Sinclair's view *Windfall* itself is not subject to these pitfalls yet it seems strange that *Freeze*, the most famous artist-run event in British art in recent memory, held only three years before in London, is nowhere mentioned in Sinclair's text. The parallels, whether then or in retrospect, seem abundantly clear. The fact that Sinclair does not mention it, even in passing, suggests a number of possible reasons for the omission. Firstly, perhaps, on principle, Sinclair does not want to favour a London-based venture by acknowledging it for fear of undermining his comments on the regional/metropolitan split. Secondly, the failure to mention *Freeze* is a conscious attempt to avoid his readership drawing parallels with the Goldsmiths group, which might undermine the efforts of the Glasgow artists. And/or thirdly, that Sinclair sees no political or philosophical affinity (or does not wish

to acknowledge it) with the strategies of the Goldsmiths/yBa group and seeks to set some distance between the two groups via the omission.<sup>119</sup>

It would be simplistic to suggest that the *Windfall* group were committed to social and political engagement at the expense of ambition and entrepreneurialism, yet it would be true to say that, in comparison with the London artists, there was more of a social/political agenda at play in both the work and strategies of these artists in the early 1990s in contrast to what seems like the raw ambition of the *Freeze* generation.<sup>120</sup> The *Windfall* artists including Sinclair, Gordon, Borland and Roberts were undoubtedly concerned with the politics of identity in relation to gender, class and nationality and in some respects they can be linked to their '80s counterparts in Scotland – as reflected in *Variant*, for example – in terms of their interest and engagement with these issues through the work they produced. They also shared a sense of resistance to authority and an apparent disdain for the officially sanctioned spaces of art (exemplified, for instance, through their tendency to locate work in public spaces). Nevertheless, in spite of their differences, the fact that the Glasgow-based artists of the '90s and the Goldsmiths graduates of the same period developed similar strategies for exposure and art world attention at almost the same time surely invites comparison.

The significance of Sinclair's essay is wide-ranging. In some respects, notably in terms of the style and use of language, the essay acts as a transition or bridge between Scottish art writing of the 1980s and 1990s. The group of writers who emerged in the early 1990s were closely connected at this stage with the older group of artists around Transmission and *Variant*. William Clark, for example, on the Transmission Committee in 1989, encouraged gallery volunteers around the time of the *Festival of Plagiarism*. These young helpers included many artists associated with Sinclair, *Windfall* and Scottish neo-conceptualism such as David Allen, Christine Borland, Jacqueline Donachie and Douglas Gordon. Following this early association with the gallery, a number of the artists (Borland, Richardson, Barclay, Boyce, Donachie, Buchanan and others) went on to become committee members who, in the early 1990s, hosted exhibitions closely allied to Dickson and Clark's interests, including exhibiting works by Dickson himself, as well as shows by Mark Pawson, Keith Piper, Peter Thomson, a large proportion of

---

<sup>119</sup> In an article on artist-run projects in *Variant* in 1993, however, Sinclair seems to revise his position somewhat, acknowledging that 'the artist-run project has become almost a pre-requisite for success in the current, post-entrepreneurial atmosphere of nineties art practice' (Sinclair, 1993, p.26).

<sup>120</sup> Sinclair's 1990 dissertation at Glasgow School of Art, for example, titled 'Capital of Culture/Culture of Capital' was an ambitious attempt to discuss the relationship between capitalism and visual culture.



film and video work and book launches by groups such as Workers City. Certainly, Dickson's influence on this younger generation of artists from Glasgow School of Art was undoubtedly key, as David Harding, Head of the Environmental Art Department from 1985 – 2001 has noted:

It was Malcolm's [Dickson's] interest in the kind of socio-political work that we were interested in in the department that accidentally built a nice bridge between us so that we were the only department in the art school who had the Transmission Committee come every year to give a talk to the students (Harding, 1995, p.27).

Similarly, Sinclair's decision to 'take up the pen' demonstrates the continuing interest in critical writing amongst artists in Scotland and the desire to engage with and participate in the critical framework which had traditionally been the domain of critics and historians. In other respects, Sinclair's essay is essentially an early manifesto and statement of intent for the group associated with *Windfall*, the self-proclaimed 'Scotia Nostra' who rose to prominence and achieved unprecedented international success in the 1990s. Along with this, the essay identifies and in some ways predicts the increasing ambition and drive for success amongst young artists, a sensibility which would come to characterise British art and artists in the 1990s and which continues to dominate art schools today. And lastly, Sinclair's emphasis on peer support and approval, as opposed to validation from the wider art world, highlights the reliance on social capital which would become a key feature of commissioning within Scottish art writing and publications of the 1990s. Essentially, the close links between members of the Transmission committee and *Variant* continued throughout the early 1990s, with the content of both organisations frequently reflecting a unified aesthetic and approach, and growing together to reflect new directions and shifts in art practice.

### ***Frieze***

If the catalogue for *Windfall* could be said to have heralded a new approach and attitude to art in 1990s Scotland, the London-based magazine *Frieze*, also launched in 1991, had similar objectives. From the very first issue the Scottish artists associated with *Windfall* were given substantial column inches in the pages of *Frieze*. Ross Sinclair became a regular contributor, writing almost exclusively on the work of his friends and close associates in Glasgow. The article 'Northern Lights', in Issue 1, took Transmission and the *Windfall* exhibition as its starting point:

This year's *Windfall* show, held in Glasgow and organized by local artists, brought together 26 international artists. The enthusiasm and openness that made a show of such diversity possible has also attracted attention from south of the border [...] With artists such as Douglas Gordon, Craig Richardson, Christine Borland and Kevin Henderson now attracting international attention, artists' initiatives have put Glasgow on the map (*Frieze*, 1991).

The rest of the article took the form of a conversation with Douglas Gordon, Nathan Coley and Martin Boyce which covered many of the same points raised by Sinclair's catalogue essay for *Windfall*. The tone, too, was similar, if less thoughtful. Just as Richard Demarco had excelled at self-promotion in any discussion of his own enterprises from the 1960s onwards, the younger artists in the 1990s were similarly effusive in their discussion of their achievements, and their general sense of self-assuredness and confidence at times verged on the hyperbolic. The artists of this generation were undoubtedly (whatever their personal politics) children of Thatcher's Britain. Their unparalleled ambition and strategic courtship of the media was eminently successful and the texts written by these artists, historicising their own work as it happened, were nothing if not self-congratulatory. As the *Windfall* essay outlined, there was nothing passive about these artists. Their understanding of how the art world operated stood them in good stead in terms of their ability to control the public and critical perception of their work. Through articles such as the *Windfall* text and articles in *Frieze*, they carefully constructed a collective public persona which relied on their ability to generate a kind of mythology surrounding their artistic development and history. Whilst much of what Gordon, Coley, Boyce and co. reported was relatively accurate, it was nevertheless – as an understanding of contemporary Scottish art – the perspective of a very small group of artists who represented themselves and their interests rather than (as they often appeared) being spokespersons or representatives of contemporary Scottish art as a whole. (The New Image painters, for example, were and are still major international players, albeit in different circles and galleries than the younger artists.) Indeed, in some of the accounts of the Scottish neo-conceptualists there is the sense that the artists were so eager to publicly distance themselves from their 1980s predecessors that, to the contrary, they 'protested too much'. In fact, one of the central ways in which the artists defined themselves was to refer, frequently, to the 1980s painters, if only to explain that this was 'what they were not'. Undoubtedly, they understood that in terms of the reputation of Scottish art outside of Scotland, this was the necessary frame of reference they had to employ. In effect, they defined themselves through their oppositional stance to the artists of the 1980s,

and more particularly, to what they regarded (in line with art world trends, it has to be noted) as a moribund mode of practice – painting. The neo-conceptualists may not have ‘reacted against’ the previous generation, but neither, despite their protests, were they ‘irrelevant’ to them. And while *Frieze* claimed that artist-run initiatives had put Glasgow ‘on the map’, it was in fact the efforts of painters and artists associated with *Variant* and New Image in the early 1980s who had created the conditions for the 1990s generation to flourish (many of the neo-conceptualists were committee members of Transmission throughout the 1990s). In the sense of the infrastructure of the Scottish art world (the rise of self-determination championed by artist-led projects such as *Variant* and Transmission) and the international recognition the ‘80s painters had brought to Scotland, the neo-conceptualists were – however inconveniently – indebted to their ‘public enemies’.

In September 1992 *Frieze* magazine published a review of an exhibition of the work of Julie Roberts by Ross Sinclair, one of the first of a number of reviews written by the recent graduates of the Environmental Art Department on the work of their immediate peers and associates.

Like his earlier essay for the *Windfall* catalogue, the tone of Sinclair’s review was informal, opening with questions posed directly to the reader:

Don’t you think that the whole protracted saga about painting being dead, dead on, or indeed neither of the two is just dead boring? Artists do it, dealers deal it, collectors buy it and here you are reading about it. I mean get over it (Sinclair, 1992a).

In Sinclair’s writings of the early to mid-1990s, both in *Frieze* and elsewhere, there is a clear sense of the development of a characteristic style and approach. In many respects Sinclair’s style and delivery in these reviews and essays are representative of the early 1990s journalistic *zeitgeist*, both in terms of his frame of reference (contemporary youth culture, for example) and his adoption of the gonzo-inspired subjectivity in evidence within British music and youth culture journalism of the period. As the review progresses into a discussion of Robert’s work in particular, Sinclair’s tone becomes more formal, offering visual description, an insight into Robert’s research-based process/practice and, finally, a brief foray into an interpretation and analysis of the work itself. A cynical reader of the review, aware of Sinclair’s personal connection with Roberts, might anticipate the kind of review which is a thinly veiled promotional exercise, a favour to a friend. To some degree, however, Sinclair’s review is a responsible one, and takes criticism seriously, offering a thoughtful if unresolved reading of Robert’s work. Though

largely positive, Sinclair presents a number of restrained value judgements, such as his comments on scale: 'Her larger canvases are generally more successful than the smaller groups. In the larger paintings the objects have room to breathe' (Sinclair, 1992a). However, whilst Sinclair ably outlines Roberts's critical intentions for her work and highlights the ethical issues she addresses, he stops short of evaluating how successful Roberts is in the visual manifestation of these ideas and objectives, in spite of his claim that the work 'demands a position be taken'. Like many reviews, Sinclair succeeds in summarising the main themes of Roberts's work alongside a close visual description of the paintings themselves. Whether through choice or limitations of word count, some of Sinclair's more pertinent insights are left hanging, with no real elaboration of some of the points he raises all too briefly, to the point of offering simplistic and rather reductive observations. But this in itself is of interest on the part of the reader. On one hand, Sinclair's shallow engagement with, for example, the Feminist discourse evoked by the work is most probably logistical – the length of a typical review, outside scholarly and academic journals, can be notoriously short. In this instance, the reviewer often struggles to cover as much as possible within the limited space allowed, which inevitably leads to oversimplification and overly concise analyses or description. But the 'skimming over' of particular issues or points could also be understood as implicit criticism of the work, perhaps suggesting that it is the handling of the subject/issue/theme within the work itself (rather than the criticism) which is shallow and reductive. Certainly, in the case of artists reviewing the work of their peers, there can often be an unspoken code of conduct – that negative criticism be tempered, that less than flattering observations be reigned in, that respect be shown regardless of the critics real opinion of the work. In Sinclair's concluding sentence he writes of Roberts's apparent disinterestedness in 'elongated debates about the pros and cons of contemporary painting', adding that 'in doing so she appears to abdicate a certain responsibility for the work, but in the process she just manages to transpose it on to the viewer' (Sinclair, 1992a). This 'summing up' could be read as either a negative or positive response to Roberts's approach to the interpretation of her work, yet Sinclair ultimately chooses not to take a stance, almost mirroring Roberts's own 'abdication' of critical responsibility.

In terms of a bridge in critical approaches between the 1980s and the 1990s, Malcolm Dickson and Ross Sinclair stand out in terms of their use of language as a stylistic device and prefigure later developments with overtly stylised writing by artists, critics and other 'art writers' in the 1990s. Dickson's writing, from his early student essays in *Stigma* to later writing in *Variant*, as I have discussed, was characterised by a

rejection of 'standard' modes of article and essay writing. The 'rules' of academic writing were made obsolete in Dickson's often highly personal, defiant and impassioned work but this very energy invites parallels with an understanding of criticism as 'passionate and political' (Baudelaire, 1846).

To a greater extent this 'masculine', confident, brash and almost sneering style can be identified in writing by Ross Sinclair and Judith Findlay. As I have noted, swearing became a key feature of Sinclair's work, and the pace and style of his delivery parallels that of rap and early 1990s post-punk US stand-up comedy and spoken word (by figures such as Bill Hicks, Denis Leary, Chris Rock and Henry Rollins).<sup>121</sup> Sinclair's use of street and hip hop slang and UK colloquialisms made his style punchy, energetic and irreverent – combining to form a unique 'hard man' writing aesthetic. This 'writing with attitude' was exemplified by the titles of essays such as Findlay's 'Fuck the Police: New Art as Subculture' (Findlay, 1994)<sup>122</sup> and Sinclair's 'Bad Smells but no sign of the Corpse', (Sinclair, 1991), 'This is Something for the Blunted'<sup>123</sup> (Sinclair, 1992b), 'Faster Than A Pool of Piss on the Sidewalk' (Sinclair, 1994a, for the last issue of Thomas Lawson's *Real Life* magazine) and 'The Beastie Boys, Nietzsche and Masturbating as an Art Form' (Sinclair, 1994b).

Sinclair's writing embraced the idea of the working-class hero which had been germinating in the UK since the '50s (linked to pop culture, music and fashion). Allied to this stance was the idea of the rebel intellectual which was a blossoming theme in 1990s US hip-hop. As punk and post-punk had been an influence on Dickson and his peers in the 1980s, hip-hop, and particularly the language of hip-hop, was an obvious influence on Sinclair's writing and art, often explicitly referenced.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, Sinclair, like

---

<sup>121</sup> This was perhaps part of a larger trend. In the early 1990s the art/music group KLF and 1980s US groups such as Sonic Youth and Lydia Lunch and writers such as Kathy Acker frequently used language associated with youth/street culture to convey political messages and an anti-establishment stance. This 'stance' was particularly evoked through the use of blasphemous and profane language.

<sup>122</sup> Findlay's essay took its title from a song by controversial US rap group NWA and refers also to Sinclair's T-shirt painting bearing the same title exhibited in a 1994 exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery.

<sup>123</sup> The title of the essay is taken from the title of Cypress Hill's song. In 1993 one of Sinclair's 'Tribute Painting Series' was 'for Cypress Hill' and contained lyrics from 'How I Could Just Kill a Man'.

<sup>124</sup> Of all 1980s and 1990s underground youth culture, hip-hop culture arguably overshadowed all others in terms of building up its own unique identity, largely forged through language and several serious hip-hop dictionaries published at the time. Hip hop culture is composed of four interlinking strands, three of which rely heavily on innovative use of text/language: MC-ing or rapping, in which freestyling is the spontaneous invention of a rhythmic 'flow' of language; DJ-ing, which, in hip-hop involves the use of several turntables on which different tracks are cut together to form new rhymes and songs from various parts; hip-hop graffiti is characterised by the dominance of stylised letters ('characters') over other imagery. Breakdancing is the only strand of the four elements of hip hop in which language is not the central theme. Hip-hop language itself varies and has many regional variations and an ever-increasing and changing range of terms. In the main, however, it is a mix of invented words, existing words used in a new context (e.g. bad, fresh), patois (and in London, cockney) and ebonics.

Dickson, seemed to see himself as a spokesperson for disaffected working-class artists reacting against the prevailing parochial, bourgeois tastes of Scottish art (and the Anglocentric attention of the international art world). In the context of this research, it is noteworthy to mention that from the 1980s onwards many of the artists who crossed the divide between art production and criticism were from working-class backgrounds, which in many respects suggests a relationship between their class identification or subject position and the critical issues and approaches they deemed significant. Whatever the impact of class politics, however, Sinclair's work was undoubtedly written, first and foremost, for his peers and it self-consciously and unashamedly appealed to the idea of 'cool'.<sup>125</sup>

Throughout the 1990s *Frieze* continued to support the work of the new generation of Scottish neo-conceptual artists around the *Windfall* group, both in terms of coverage of their work and through the publication of writing by the artists themselves.<sup>126</sup> In Scotland, at the same time, in the gap left by *Variant* and *Alba*, catalogue essays began once again to take on a prominent role in the discussion and dissemination of Scottish art internationally, through galleries such as the CCA (formerly the Third Eye Centre) and the Fruitmarket in Edinburgh, along with continued publications by artist-run organisations such as Transmission and Collective. *Variant* (Volume Two), though it eventually became a broader socio-political cultural journal rather than a visual arts magazine, was, in the mid-1990s, a major force in fostering new talent and encouraging critical writing amongst artists. Many of the most sustained and developed analyses and critiques of Scottish art continued to appear in *Variant* throughout the late 1990s, despite its policy to avoid the standard 'review' and its increasing focus on infrastructure and art world politics (as opposed to discussion of particular works or artists). Many of these articles and essays were written by the editor Leigh French and co-editor William Clark, though French in particular actively sought out and encouraged writing by artists, including those who had previously remained unpublished. As well as becoming a significant (and controversial) critical voice in his own right, French took on the mantle held by Moffat and Dickson as an significant figure in commissioning writing by

---

<sup>125</sup> Sinclair was also a burgeoning rock/pop star at the time, as a member of the successful early 1990s indie group The Soup Dragons

<sup>126</sup> See, for example, Sinclair's reviews on Roddy Buchanan ('Global Village Idiots', *Frieze*, Issue 16, May 1994), Simon Starling at Transmission Gallery ('Simon Starling', *Frieze*, Issue 38, Jan-Feb 1998), Jim Lambie at Transmission Gallery ('Jim Lambie', *Frieze*, Issue 46, May 1999) and Peter McCaughey ('Peter McCaughey', *Frieze*, Issue 52, May 2000). Also see Douglas Gordon's review of Jacqueline Donachie ('Jacqueline Donachie', *Frieze*, Issue 18, Oct 1994) and Thomas Lawson (linked to the group through the Bellgrove Billboard Project and Sinclair's writing for Lawson's *Real Life* magazine) on Douglas Gordon ('Hello, It's Me', *Frieze*, Issue 9, March 1993).

younger artists, as well as continuing to publish writing by artists associated with the former incarnation of *Variant*, such as Mark Pawson and Ian Brotherhood. In addition, texts by art historians and critics who would go on to become major figures in the Scottish art world were offered early opportunities by French to publish extended texts in the pages of *Variant* (Neil Mulholland is a key example here) which undoubtedly allowed them to develop their critical voice.

All of these outlets for art writing and criticism in the early 1990s – catalogues, fanzines, gallery handouts and magazines – frequently featured texts by practising artists as often as critics and historians. The tendency for artists, editors and galleries to commission artists as writers highlighted the continued shift in attitudes towards the role of the ‘artist-critic’ over the course of the previous two decades and the commitment to the notion of self-determination on the part of artists themselves.

Sinclair’s texts of the 1990s, though linked to the later forms which appeared from the mid 1990s onwards (discussed in the following section) perhaps provide a link between these two otherwise distinct approaches, broadly characterised by the gradual disappearance of polemical or rhetorical approaches in favour of a more allusive, literary mode of engagement. Whilst the oppositional and contestative elements of Sinclair’s texts were of a different polemical type than those of Dickson, Currie, Clark and company in the 1980s, he nevertheless attempted to contextualise the critical principles and motivations of his peers by comparing their approach divisively with the previous generation of artists. As I have discussed, Sinclair’s account of New Image was perhaps reductive, and is certainly at odds with Currie’s perspective on his own work, but it represented one of the last real attempts on the part of artist-critics to offer both a polemical critique of contemporary Scottish art and an account of why new developments in art had occurred. In 1999, in spite of previous claims to the contrary, Sinclair wrote of his peers’ reaction to the previous generation of Scottish artists, represented by New Image:

The situation that existed in Glasgow at the time my peer group emerged was called New Image Painting. From my perspective, this art movement consisted of boring monologues of white, middle-class, male artists painting gruesome pictures of down and outs in the east end of Glasgow and selling them to rich collectors in Berlin and New York. New Image Painting was basically expressionism that had come second-hand from the Germany of the late 70s. It embraced the myth of the male artist toiling away in his studio, sending paintings down to the gallery in the big city [New Image] became the new establishment. It was open season for self-

determination and New Image painting, this neo-expressionism, was an easy target to oppose (Sinclair, 1999).

The following section considers the legacy of both the artist-writers associated with New Image, and those involved with the Windfall group. It provides a brief overview of the most visible and controversial shifts in approaches to art writing between the 1980s and 1990s, the demise of polemics and the emergence of increasingly stylised and tangential forms of writing about art.

## **After 1990**

In the 1980s artist-writers in Scotland were only too willing to offer forthright opinions and rush headlong into the polemic, rhetorical and didactic arena. In the 1990s, some artist-writers continued in the tradition of *Variant* and the *Edinburgh Review*, most notably a group of younger artists who had moved from London to Glasgow to study on the MFA programme at Glasgow School of Art. Leigh French was amongst this group. Along with former *Variant* contributor William Clark, French took on the role as co-editor of the new version of *Variant* in 1996. Under French's editorship, artist-writers (and fellow MFA graduates) such as John Beagles began to contribute to the magazine, along with writing on art for catalogue essays and reviewing for magazines such as *The List*. Though similarly concerned with art world politics, Beagles's writing was often more playful in tone than that of artist-writers such as French and Clark. As such, many of Beagles's essays and reviews can be seen to have continued in the vein of Ross Sinclair's writing in terms of an irreverent, energetic and often humorous mode of delivery. In contrast, French's texts for *Variant* followed the path furrowed by Clark in the 1980s with regard to tone, style and subject matter. The explicitly politicised and oppositional approach of critical writing which had characterised art writing in the 1980s remained in many *Variant* texts throughout the 1990s, with polemics often based on issues such as arts funding, criticism and education.

Other than those texts for *Variant*, however, a notable change occurred in Scottish art writing from the mid-1990s onwards, representative of yet another generational shift and a reflection of broader critical developments. In contrast to the controversial, often aggressive tone which had characterised art writing in the 1980s both the overt promotion and overt condemnation of art decreased significantly as the 1990s progressed. Hints of such developments can be identified in Ross Sinclair's essays and reviews of the early 1990s, especially with regard to the move away from a direct response to specific works and the gradual disappearance of visual description, even in exhibition reviews. And though different in



timbre and mode, Sinclair's emphasis on the style and form of his writing prefigures what would become an over-riding characteristic of later writing on art in Scotland – an overt stylisation in art writing. Elements of a gonzo-esque approach to reviewing and related forms of critical writing remained to a degree, but alongside this came an intense focus on the production of 'beautiful', poetic prose, in which art writing (especially in the form of the catalogue essay) increasingly began to resemble literature.

As the group of neo-conceptual artists around Ross Sinclair began to achieve international success as artists their interest in writing waned. Artists such as Douglas Gordon, who had written for *Frieze* in the early 1990s, instead began to commission writing from a new group of critics who came to prominence in the mid-1990s. Largely based in Glasgow, the names of academics and curators such as John Calcutt, Francis McKee, Will Bradley and Ross Birrell became ubiquitous in the catalogue texts and reviews of Scottish artists in the 1990s and early 2000s. Whilst Birrell pursued subject matter and aspects of experimental writing already encountered in *Variant* in the late 1980s (specifically the notion of plagiarism), Calcutt and McKee have both cited the US art writer Dave Hickey as an influence.

These figures can be seen to have, albeit belatedly in an international context, adopted many of the post-critical approaches and writerly features highlighted by Gregory Ulmer in his 1985 essay 'The Object of Post-criticism'. This can be seen particularly in the new directions taken by critics experimenting with citation and plagiarism, though in a very different manner to the Neoist 'multiple name' experiments of late 1980s *Variant* writers. One of the most identifiable stylistic trends in 1990s art writing, therefore, has been the use of fragmented and 'found' text in writings (often catalogue essays) by critics, academics and curators such as Francis McKee, John Calcutt, Will Bradley and artists such as Ross Birrell.<sup>127</sup> As Ulmer noted:

Criticism now is being transformed in the same way that literature and the arts were transformed by the avant-garde movements in the early decades of this century. The break with 'mimesis', with the values and assumptions of 'realism', which revolutionized the modernist arts, is now underway (belatedly) in criticism (Ulmer, 1985, p84).

---

<sup>127</sup> With the exception of Birrell, none of these figures are artists, though Calcutt studied Fine Art with Art History briefly as an undergraduate student at the University of Edinburgh. Birrell, a graduate of the University of Glasgow, began to work as an artist whilst working at Glasgow School of Art.

Ulmer added that post-criticism' 'is constituted precisely by the application of the devices of modernist art to critical representations; furthermore, that the principal device taken over by critics and theorists is the compositional pair of collage/montage'. As part of their experiments with the mode and style of art writing, Calcutt, Bradley, Birrell and McKee all produced 'appropriative' texts which exemplified what Ulmer described in his identification of collage as a device in writing which takes the form of citation 'but citation carried to an extreme [...] 'post-critics write with the discourse of others (the already-written) the way Levine "takes" photographs' (Ulmer, 1985, p.96).

The most prominent artist-writers in the 1980s, such as Dickson, Currie and Moffat, began to regard this newer 'creative' and overtly stylised writing of the late '90s as, at best, a refusal or avoidance to address potentially difficult or controversial issues on the part of the critic, and at worst, a self-indulgent descent into 'pure style'. In short, the divisions between the explicitly politically engaged and theorised writing of the 1980s and the more allusive, 'literary turn' in Scottish art writing in the mid- to late 1990s (and up to the present) became stark.

The success of Scottish artists in the 1990s may have impacted on the decreasing interest in the oppositional potential of art writing. In some respects the critical responses to the Scottish neo-conceptualists (whose work was generally met with routine praise and critical acclaim) echoed the fanfare with which New Image was greeted in the 1980s. There was a sense, almost, that the Scottish art world was so relieved to have a successful, exportable and internationally renowned group of visual artists that the job of Scottish critics should be wholly that of advocacy, a kind of nationalistic ambassadorial role. Much as Dickson and Clark had been criticised for their attempts to dismantle the furore around New Image in the 1980s (the suggestion often being that they were 'spoilsports' whose invective was spurred on purely by sour grapes), in the 1990s Ken Currie found himself at the heart of a similar storm. The account is interesting in two ways: firstly, the sense of history repeating itself in the 1990s seems to indicate a reluctance on the part of the Scottish art world to encourage provocative critical dialogue and secondly, Currie's frustration at his 'silencing' reveals a generational shift in relation to what criticism is and should do.

In his account of a storm that emerged following his criticism of the new generation of artists, Currie positions himself firmly as one of those artist-critics of the 1970s and '80s who regarded polemics and

direct value judgements as a crucial element of a healthy critical scene and who decry its loss in criticism from the 1990s onwards in Scotland. It also perhaps reveals Currie's understanding of the emerging critical shift which would characterise approaches to writing on art from the early 1990s onwards and his awareness of the role of social capital in texts produced by the neo-conceptualists. The aftermath of Currie's publication of an article on the *Windfall* artists, published in *Scotland on Sunday*, created a storm of protest on a par with the New Image debate in the *Edinburgh Review*. Currie claims that 'the polemics had died down' by this time and that the resultant text had been heavily edited to 'dumb it down'. The message and tone of the piece, however, was not lost on the artists it attacked, who invited Currie to a public forum to further discuss the issues he had raised. As he recalls:

In the mid 1990s I had a real go at the Windfall group. I really went for them. I thought there was a real complacency entering into it all. There was too much "hey, yeah, well done you, have another show at Tramway". They were all patting each other on the back and I wanted to put forward an alternative viewpoint from someone who wasn't part of their group. This is the way artists debate. This is the way they've always been fighting with each other. The Dadaists, the Surrealists. It seemed to me, though, that polemics had gone out of the window and its polemics I believe in. By taking a position you encounter a different position and that forces you to rethink your position. But after that [the publication of the *Scotland on Sunday* article] I actually got pulled up by the Arts Council director. He took me aside and told me not to rock the boat. He said 'We've got something happening here in Scottish art, all these artists are going right to the top, you have to be supportive". I said 'Look, this needs to come out of a critical culture – we need to know that this work has come out of a tumultuous, live, living, breathing critical culture – it's not some manufactured career product where no-one's allowed to rock the boat." It really pissed me off and I just withdrew, totally. I thought 'I'm having nothing to do with it'. There's obviously no hunger for it – no one wants to ask the awkward questions – and if they do want to ask awkward questions they want to ask them in such rarefied environment that no-ones really going to read it or engage in it' (Currie, 2002).

The move towards a poetic and literary rather than discursive or dialogic style of art writing was regarded by many, both within Scotland and more broadly, as a contributing factor in the subsequent decline of 'serious' discourse around contemporary art. Far from being a specifically Scottish concern, concerns over the latest 'crisis in criticism' were frequently seen as linked to the development of these

new approaches to criticism were widespread in Britain and the US (such approaches, whilst often heralded as a 'new' post-critical mode were, in fact, not new. The boundaries between creative and critical prose had often been bridged and the developments of the late 1990s in Scotland could be seen as a return, or retreat, to earlier models of writing on art, such as the 'creative' critical texts of figures such as Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater and Walter Benjamin). Likewise, in a Scottish context, experiments in plagiarism creative prose 'as' criticism had already been seen (albeit motivated by different factors) in the writings of Stewart Home, Peter Horobin and others (as Karen Eliot, Bob Jones etc.) in the pages of *Variant*. Writing of his first novel, Home noted, 'as is the case with all my writing, plagiarism plays a major role in the process of composition. In *Pure Mania*, I take Richard Allen's skinhead books as a role model for my prose style and narrative technique. (Home, 1991, p.5). In Scottish literature the precedent was also established, such as the interest in plagiarism in Alasdair Gray's 1981 novel *Lanark*.<sup>128</sup>

In Rosalind Krauss's 1980 essay 'Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary', the author discussed the way in which Roland Barthes had 'pointed to an intention to blur the distinction between literature and criticism' in which 'criticism finds itself caught in a dramatic web of many voices, citations, asides, divigations [...] what is created is a kind of paraliterature' (Krauss, 1980 p.37). For Krauss, 'the paraliterary cannot be a model for the systematic unpacking of the meanings of a work of art that criticism's task is thought to be'. Artist-critics such as Moffat, Dickson and Currie, in relation to art writing of the late 1990s, would undoubtedly agree with Krauss. Certainly, all three have expressed frustration at the growing indifference to the contestative potential of critical writing and the opportunity for dialogue and debate such writing offers. Similarly, looking back at the writings of

---

<sup>128</sup> As I have noted, *Lanark* was a significant precursor in the use of plagiarism as a literary device within Scottish art criticism of the 1990s. Various, the critics and writers discussed here, both in the 1980s and 1990s, experimented with each type of plagiarism identified by Gray in his 'Index of Plagiarism'. Block plagiarism, for example, has been used to delineate a citation without recourse to a direct reference or footnote. It is also used to experiment formally with the appearance of the text and page (e.g. to dislocate and fragment the text through the 'dividing' line of plagiarism between 'new' and stolen text (e.g. Calcutt, 1996, McKee, 2002, Birrell, 2002). Imbedded plagiarism is used frequently by those critics who experiment with coded or archaic language 'imbedded' into a 'template' style, such as Neil Mulholland's essay on Lucy McKenzie (Mulholland, 2001) or Graham Ramsay's *Upon Seven Days in Fair Glasgow* (Ramsay, 1997) or, loosely, Ross Sinclair's use of slang phrases in *This is Something for the Blunted* (1992). Diffuse plagiarism, or pastiche, is identifiable in Mulholland's *Woodwardians*, (Mulholland, 2002) Calcutt's *Shadow Fragments* (2000) or Will Bradley's *Thoreau* (1997). Ross Birrell's *One-Way Street* (2002) encompasses all three.

Cordelia Oliver, a key focus was on interpretation and discussion of specific works, yet as Krauss notes of 'paraliterary' modes of writing:

These theories run exactly counter to the notion that there is a work x, behind which there stands a group of meanings, a b, or c, which the hermeneutic task of the critic unpacks, reveals, by breaking through, peeling back the literal surface of the work (Krauss, 1980, p.38).

Where 1980s critics and writers sought to defend or support an identifiable 'position' and acknowledged these positions directly in their writing the most prolific critics of the mid to late 1990s, such as Birrell, Calcutt, McKee and Bradley, frequently fostered a more oblique way of responding to works both in their pursuit of new critical forms (such as 'appropriative' writing) and in response to commissions from artists who asked writers to 'write around' the works rather than discuss them directly.<sup>129</sup> Writing of his approach to critical writing Calcutt has cited Michael Baxandall's *Patterns of Intention* which could be seen to encompass the approach of this later group:

So many of the thoughts we will want to explain are indirect, in the sense that they are not pointed directly at the picture...Most of the better things we can think or say about pictures stand in a slightly peripheral relation to the picture itself (Baxandall, 1985, in Calcutt, 1996).

Whether or not we are in agreement with Baxandall, these 'peripheral', allusive and inferential texts are undoubtedly odds with the critical impetus of Moffat and Currie, whose approach was informed by their beliefs on the role of art in society:

It [writing] was seen as part of a process of making art accessible, making it more democratic, and de-mystifying it so that people who weren't involved in high culture could actually engage with serious art. Language is universal, it's immediate, you can explain what you're trying to do and try to talk about the power of images to people who are not necessarily visually literate in

---

<sup>129</sup> McKee claims that one of his first texts on art came about not through an interest in stylistic innovation, but rather, due to his own lack of knowledge on contemporary art when commissioned by Douglas Gordon to write an essay: 'Douglas asked me to write something and I said 'I don't know anything about contemporary art', so he said 'That doesn't matter – just write about something you're interested in'. Because I had a research background in medical history a lot of my early catalogue essays were related to this, and the writing was linked to the art in a very indirect way. I think this suited a lot of those artists, Christine [Borland], Douglas and so on because they didn't want the promotional, flattering essay about 'the artist' and how great the work was, and they didn't necessarily want anyone explaining it either, so the parallel text came about for me, originally, through the requests of the commissioner rather than my own initiative or interest in 'style' ' (McKee, 2002a).

terms of high culture – people don't have much access to the history of painting for example'(Currie, 2002).

Similarly, as I have discussed, Alexander Moffat referred to Gombrich's writing as an inspiration because of his use of clear, lucid and understandable language, even when dealing with difficult concepts. The style of Gombrich's prose, according to Moffat may have been linked to the fact that Gombrich was writing in English as a second language. Whatever the reason, Moffat's admiration rested on Gombrich's style and use of 'non-flowery' language – his ability to 'get to the heart of the matter rather than rambling on at the end' (Moffat, 2002). Moffat has been a particular opponent of the new forms of writing, making public his views on the more experimental texts produced by figures such as Calcutt and McKee.<sup>130</sup> For Moffat, nationality once again comes into his perspective in terms of his association of McKee's writing as coming from a tradition outside of Scottish criticism:

Francis McKee is an interesting figure. He's coming from an Irish tradition which James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and even Brendan Behan belonged to in which they are basically literary figures who can write essays about anything. You have the more realistic and hardnosed Scottish point of view then Francis comes along with his lyrical outpourings and doesn't really get down to the nitty gritty. I'm not interested in style in art writing. With the great writers you're not aware of their style. With Berger it's all about content and subject matter, Style is an empty gesture, whereas interpretation is important (Moffat, 2002).

---

<sup>130</sup> For instance, in 2001 the students of the Painting Department at Glasgow School of Art commissioned a text by Ross Birrell for their Degree Show catalogue. The resulting text caused friction between Moffat and the students as it was a 'tangential' and fragmentary text comprised of a series of anecdotes about Youth Radio B92, a radical independent station broadcasting from Belgrade. The text was non-linear and, for Moffat, obfuscatory. Moffat was insistent that the essay be pulled from the catalogue, and claimed that several colleagues in the Department were offended by it. Finally, Birrell's essay was published alongside a 'straight' text by Moffat dealing with painting as studio practice (its legacy and cultural value). Moffat's text seemed designed to ameliorate Birrell's contribution, which was seen by Moffat as irrelevant and misrepresentative of the work (Figgis, 2010). In another instance, Moffat commissioned Terry Atkinson to respond to the text of the previous year's catalogue essay, written by John Calcutt, which again revealed critical divisions regarding the tone and function of the catalogue essay.

Perhaps, though, the approaches adopted in the texts discussed throughout the thesis were not always merely a matter of the critical principles chosen by the writers. It could perhaps be argued that the varying modes of criticism representative of each decade have been influenced by the character of the artworks to which they have responded. As Michael Schreyach has suggested, such approaches could be seen as mimetic or performative in their engagement with the works:

But what about criticism that is not written to explain, nor to demonstrate, nor to evaluate. But instead to collapse the distance between the two poles? This criticism would be characterised by its ability to create for readers an experience that possesses qualities of the critic's original confrontation with the object, text, or process that serves as the occasion for writing. This would be the kind of criticism that performs what it putatively describes (Schreyach, 2008, p.17)

The 'straight' direct and traditional style of art criticism in the 1970s, for instance, such as that of Alexander Moffat and Alan Bold, perhaps reflected the works they discussed, works which, however sophisticated, were relatively unambiguous in aims and critical intentions. The 'angry young men' post-punk vitriol, heated polemics and use of strong language in 'alternative' 1980s art criticism (e.g. *Variant*, *Stigma*) were likewise reflected in the approach of art works which emerged from 1980s 'counter-culture', exemplified by the explicitly politicised works of artists exhibiting at Transmission Gallery in the mid-1980s. In the 1990s, comparable relationships between art and criticism could be identified with regard to style, in, for instance, the move away from 'direct statement' to inference and subtlety (in terms of subject matter or 'message' at least) in late 1990s Scottish contemporary art (the work of artists such as Joanne Tatham and Tom O'Sullivan, Cathy Wilkes and Lucy McKenzie in this period are just a few examples of such work).

The divisions in opinions regarding the function and purpose of criticism, and debates over what 'good criticism' should look like are ongoing. The dominant modes established in the 1990s continue to be prevalent today and the 'literary turn' in Scottish art writing shows no signs of abating. Like all new directions, however, such texts have spawned a rash of imitators with subsequent generations of artist-writers keen to produce texts which follow such 'fashionable' critical models. As Malcolm Dickson has noted, 'a new kind of orthodoxy has emerged. There's a kind of mimicking of experimental literary styles. I'm not sure whether that approach is successful or not. It's difficult to judge the efficacy of a piece of writing that takes that approach' (Dickson, 2002). Dickson's point is significant. When can such

writing (or that art it discusses) be deemed to fail in such an endlessly relativist art world? For Dickson, Currie and Moffat, the failure of such writing is its tastefulness, politeness and its lack of critical bite. Writing in a catalogue of Alasdair Gray and Alasdair Taylor's work in 2008, Dickson, quoting James Kelman, suggested that 'the critic must take a risk. Scotland is in dire need of good criticism, especially those unafraid to go public. Their absence leaves the way for third-rate commentary [...] it springs from a less edifying feature of the Scottish Enlightenment: the drive to root out Scotticisms; a fear of the uncouth indigenous (Kelman, 2005 in Dickson, 2008, p.11).

Critics 'unafraid to go public' were easy to find in the 1960s and 1970s with Cordelia Oliver at the forefront of Scottish art writing. In the 1980s, similarly, there was no shortage of risk-taking critics. Certainly, Kelman's claims that contemporary 'third-rate' critics show 'a fear of the uncouth indigenous' is not an accusation that could have been levelled at the aggressive, antagonistic polemics of *Variant*. Perhaps the key issue here has been the sheer scale of this so-called 'generational shift', from one pole to the other. Rather than co-existing, with each mode offering a valuable and useful model of engaging with visual art, the rise of 'creative criticism' in the 1990s undoubtedly occurred at the same time as the disappearance of interpretative, explanatory and polemical critical writing on art.



## CONCLUSION

Along with the issues and debates raised by the individual texts themselves, this research has sought to present a narrative arch which traces the development of art criticism and related forms of art writing in the period considered. In some respects, as I have discussed, the shifts identified here are characteristic of wider developments in approaches to writing about visual art. Broadly, the development of Scottish art writing shows a move from the modernist, didactic or dogmatic mode of writing in the 1960s and 1970s, through the discursive, theoretically-informed polemics of the 1980s to a more suggestive and allusive postmodern relativism in the 1990s – similar directions can be seen throughout Anglophone criticism of the same period.

Whilst the wide trajectory from modernist dogmatism to postmodern relativism might provide a kind of framework for understanding developments in writing on visual art from the 1960s onwards, none of the writers I have considered can be easily categorised using the modernist/postmodernist model. For example, whilst in tone and style Cordelia Oliver's writing could be seen to have reflected features of art criticism common to the period, her frequent support of 'the underdogs' of Scottish art and her continued emphasis on interdisciplinary parallels and analogies in her reading of art works reveal the distinctive features of her critical position. In this way, Oliver's writing 'fits' with the dominant Modernist understanding of criticism as didactic, evaluative and interpretative. Simultaneously, though, her determination to champion and advocate artists and curators whose work acted as a counterpoint to the prevailing *belle peinture* trends in Scottish art (such as Demarco's activities and the work of lesser-known west coast figurative painters, and, not least, the work of women artists) invites parallels with the revisionist strategies of art historians associated with the rise of postmodernism in the 1980s. The US critics and historians associated with the *October* school, for example, became known for challenging the orthodoxy of Modernist art history as written by formalists such as Alfred H. Barr, Herbert Read and Clement Greenberg. They accomplished this in part by proposing a range of alternative accounts of the development of Modernist art through their focus on groups such as Dada, Surrealism, their interest in forms such as performance, film and photography which had been routinely excluded from highly

selective Greenbergian/Formalist accounts.<sup>131</sup> In a Scottish context, Oliver's texts similarly offer a different history of Scottish art than that found in dominant accounts by art historians such as Duncan MacMillan or represented in major survey exhibitions by institutions such as the National Galleries of Scotland.

Similarly, whilst Malcolm Dickson's writing is discussed in terms of its 'contestative' quality and didacticism (the hallmarks of Modernist criticism) the devices and writerly features employed by Dickson anticipate texts by a later generation of writers, especially in terms of his experimental approach to the use of language. The use of vernacular phrasing, slang and swearing in Dickson's texts of the early 1980s marks a distinct change in the tone of art writing in Scotland, introducing a style not usually encountered in conventional critical texts up to this point. Together with their irreverent use of language, Dickson, Sinclair and later writers such as John Calcutt and Ross Birrell could be seen as representative of some of the key tenets of postmodernism, such as the tendency to mix of high and low cultural references (and terminologies) in their discussions of art. The development is telling in terms of a generational shift, for whilst Cordelia Oliver frequently referenced other art forms in her description and discussion of visual art, those references were consistently drawn from the realm of 'high culture', such as opera, ballet and theatre. Similarly, Alexander Moffat, Robert Crozier and Alan Bold made regular use of parallels and references to 'high culture' (literature and art history) in their art writing but rarely referenced popular culture. In contrast, artist-writers such as Dickson and Sinclair introduced (for art criticism, at least) unexpected analogies which typically included points of reference such as punk, drugs, hip hop and football alongside Situationism, Nietzsche, Baudrillard and Artaud. The exploration of plagiarism and creative critical writing on visual art in the pages of *Variant* in the 1980s also prefigures later, more stylised manifestations of so-called 'post-critical' approaches in the 1990s. These overlaps and crossovers between periods and approaches, whilst presenting difficulties in terms of establishing a clear taxonomy of writing on visual art in the period, nevertheless demonstrate the generative nature of such writing and demonstrate that the aims of earlier writers in the 1960s and 1970s – to foster and encourage critical debate amongst artists – had been realised in the work of their successors in the 1980s.

---

<sup>131</sup> Arguably, however, the October school themselves have become the new orthodoxy, dominating art historical accounts of both Modern and Postmodern art and typically showing their own selective vision in focussing almost exclusively on US artists.

Along with the changes in the character of art writing mentioned above, perhaps the most visible development in Scottish art writing from the 1960s to the 1990s has been the move away from the discussion and interpretation of specific works. In spite of the diversity of approaches to art writing seen since the 1960s, there is little doubt that though Oliver was committed to a critique of the shibboleths of the Scottish art world (referenced throughout her writing) her reviews were nevertheless characterised primarily by her close attention to the description and analysis of art works. What may once have seemed to have been the *raison d'être* of art criticism and writing on visual art (the direct response to the exhibited works) increasingly gave way to a focus on the socio-political contexts from which the works emerged. It is revealing, for instance, to note the almost complete absence of references to specific works of art in Malcolm Dickson's writing on New Image painting or Ross Sinclair's essay for *Windfall '91*.

In Paul Stirton's article, mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the author claimed that in the historiography of art history in Scotland 'none of the writers have attempted a systematic social history of Scottish art' adding that 'we are reliant on an approach that is almost entirely defined by production i.e. by what the artists painted [...]. There is hardly anything on the opposite side of this binary system: 'consumption' (Stirton, 2007, p.42). Whilst it would be false to claim that the texts discussed here constitute a 'systematic' account, it could be argued that, taken as a cross-section of writing, the texts which form the basis of this research go some way towards filling the gap identified by Stirton. As the examples I have discussed demonstrate, a particular focus in many of the texts produced by these artist-writers has been a discussion of consumption and reception of art works – the very opposite of 'production' side of the binary system described by Stirton. This can be seen throughout the work of the key figures I discuss, from Cordelia Oliver's repeated discussion of art world politics in her reviews, and her extended critiques of institutions such as the RSA and Scottish art schools, to Crozier's dissenting voice in the pages of *Rocket*. The writings of Oliver, Crozier and Currie (such as Crozier's 'Drawing Room Painting in Edinburgh' (Crozier, 1964a) Currie's 'The Dying Gasps of Bourgeois Art' (Currie, 1982) and many of Oliver's reviews of the annual RSA exhibition) were often concerned with the way in which the most dominant modes of painting in Scotland seemed to be in thrall to the polite, bourgeois tastes of the market. As such, their texts offer an initial response to the question posed by Stirton when he asked, 'might we see art in Edinburgh, when "belle-peinture" was at its height, as something shaped not by the artists themselves but by what could be 'consumed' by a middle class with cosmopolitan aspirations?'

Stirton, 2007, p.42). Similarly, Bold's and Moffat's manifesto-like calls for a return to socially-engaged painting deal with more than 'production', as do Dickson's and Clark's polemics on the art market and Sinclair's commitment to self-determination in his catalogue essays, which likewise deal with patterns of 'consumption' in terms of exhibitions and curating, again focusing on art world infrastructure and hierarchies.

In the introduction to this thesis, and throughout my discussion of the key figures, I have emphasised the motivation on the part of the artist-writers to 'cut out the middleman' by taking on the role of the critic or commentator on visual art. Writing of Robert Morris's 1966 *Artforum* essay 'Notes on Sculpture', Leanne Carroll has argued that 'the phenomenon of the artist-as-critic can be seen as an assertion of authority on the part of artists against critics like Greenberg' (Carroll, 2008, p.8). Likewise, many of the artist-writers discussed here have explicitly stated that their intention in starting to write about art was linked to what Ross Sinclair describes as self-determination on the part of artists, and to what Dickson has defined as being 'about the creation of a culture without mediation. We were trying to eliminate a "secondariness" in the production, exhibition and writing of art' (Dickson, 2002).<sup>132</sup>

In 1993 Robert Morris reflected on his critical position as an artist-writer, noting:

I rejected from the beginning the market- and media-driven prescription that the visual should be promoted to a worshipful ontology while the wordless artist, a mute fabricator of consistent artefacts, was forbidden to set foot on theoretical and critical ground (Morris, 1993, p.ix).

Morris's position echoes that of Moffat and Currie, discussed in chapters two and three, in terms of their determination to resist and undermine the common perception that visual artists should not enter into critical discourse (the prevailing view within Scottish art schools at the time they began writing).

The critic John Calcutt noted in relation to recent Scottish art, particularly that which has taken as its subject matter 'the lonely, obsessive pursuits of bedroom culture (the interest in popular culture, subculture, music and so on)', that 'curators and critics are often maligned, but they have an important role to play'. For Calcutt, unless such work 'somehow engages with wider public discourse and socio-

---

<sup>132</sup> Dickson, for example, is significant in being one of the rare Scottish voices of dissent in the New Image debate, a critical storm otherwise dominated by London and US-based critics, in spite of the high profile of Scottish painters such as Steven Campbell.

political concerns it is condemned to pointlessness. [...]'. He adds that 'curators and critics are the agents of such discourse, mediators who pull the work into the public domain' (Calcutt 2001a, p.22). In the all of the examples I have considered, this 'mediating role' has been taken on by artists and the interlocution between artist and audience has been short-circuited by figures who have sought not to leave the engagement with 'wider public discourse and socio-political concerns' to the critic or curator, but have attempted themselves to contextualise and critique the work of their peers and contemporaries by taking on these multiple roles.

I would argue, however, that in the examples I have considered there have been other catalysts for artists in Scotland to begin writing, beyond the attempt to contest the notion of the 'wordless artist' reliant on the outside critic for interpretation, context and wider public engagement. The desire for critical autonomy on the part of many of the artist-writers in Scotland could, for instance, also be seen as a geo-political stance. In the introduction I quoted Kenneth Frampton's definition of critical regionalism. Though Frampton was writing of architecture, the parallels are easy to identify in relation to the catalysts for artists in Scotland to comment on and critique Scottish art. To reiterate Frampton's words, the figures I discuss have frequently demonstrated their affinity with 'a kind of anti-centrist consensus – an aspiration at least to some form of cultural, economic and political independence' (Frampton, 1992, p.314).

In Neil Mulholland's 2003 article 'Leaving Glasvegas' the author argues that contemporary art from Scotland has been consistently misrepresented by 'Londoncentric criticism'. In the text Mulholland cites the 'poorly conceived' curation and surrounding criticism of exhibitions such as *Early One Morning* (Whitechapel, July-September 2002), writing that they 'entirely miss the nuances of recent Scottish art and the distinct contexts in which it is cultivated' and insist instead in attempting to 'corral such practices as a "British" formalist revival'(Mulholland, 2003, p.10). In his analysis of the development and reception of recent Scottish art, Mulholland discredits previous attempts by 'key commentators' to force neo-conceptual Scottish art into ill-fitting sociological models, arguing that 'one of the distinctive features of Scottish art is that it functions as a 'cottage industry', having grown out of a proliferation of artist-run initiatives and grass-roots activity rather than through support from major publicly funded organisations'. If this is the case, he argues, 'these origins have resulted in a specific aesthetic which can only be appreciated by those intimately involved with the work's production and reception' (Mulholland, 2003, p.10).

While Mulholland perhaps overstates the case, his comments are nevertheless apposite in terms of many of the examples I have discussed. Again, in much of the writings of Moffat, Dickson, Currie and Clark in the 1980s, for example, the arguments were fore-grounded by a discussion of the specific contexts from which the works emerged, namely, the art historical, political and socio-economic context of Scotland and Glasgow.

If there is one element common to all of the writers discussed in this research, then, it is the tendency towards self-determination and the development of a 'DIY' ethos in terms of writing and publishing. This was the stated intention of artist-critics such as Moffat, who (comparing the state of visual art criticism with the debates taking place around Scottish literature) saw the development of critical discourse on visual art as essential to its 'health' and progression. In the relative absence of other voices, and a quickly exhausted pool of critics in Scotland on whom to call for essays and critical texts, Moffat, as Director of the New 57 Gallery, regarded it as impingent upon himself to 'take up the pen'. Many of the publications I have considered could be regarded as akin to the 'grass-roots' artist-run initiatives discussed by Mulholland (*Rocket*, *Variant*, and the plethora of gallery texts and catalogues published by artist-run groups and spaces such as Transmission and *Windfall '91* are key examples).

In 1999 Ross Sinclair delivered a paper to a symposium on 'Global Culture and Arts Communities'. His comments encapsulate the many of the motivating factors that have led artists to write about art in Scotland, and act as a fitting conclusion to this research:

One important question is how does writing and publishing material about artists [...] contribute to the process of historication and the reification of the aims and objectives of any given group? This is particularly important in a place which is traditionally understood to be on the periphery, on the margin. How is the place articulated, by whom and where? Writing can sometimes make concrete ideas out of attitudes that have been shifting and are still open to change. This can be good and bad, often it means centralising the margin, in other words creating a new centre for better or worse, in truth and falsehood (Sinclair, 1999).

Finally, I assert that the texts produced by the artist-writers at the heart of this research have frequently adhered to Charles Baudelaire's dictum that '[...] to justify its existence, criticism should be partial, passionate and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons' (Baudelaire, 1846).

## REFERENCES and BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALBA (1986 – 1992) All issues

ANON. (1986) 'War of Images review', *Transmission Gallery Newsletter*, March in STEPHENSON, C. & McLAUGHLAN, A. (2001), *Transmission*, Glasgow: Transmission Gallery/Black Dog, p.17

ARNATT, M. & COLLINGS, M. (2004) *Criticism*, London: Rachmaninoff's.

ASCHERSON, N. (1981) 'Seven Poets', *Seven Poets*, [exh. cat], Glasgow: Third Eye Centre Ltd, pp.17-31.

BANNET, E.T. (1989) *Structuralism and the Logic of Dissent*, Macmillan Press, London.

BARNES, H. J. (1970) 'Letter from H. Jefferson Barnes', *Scottish International*, Issue 11, September, Edinburgh: Scottish International Review Ltd.

BARTHES, R. (2000) 'Neither-Nor Criticism', in *Mythologies*, Vintage, London, p.81. (reissue of 1972 edition)

BAUDELAIRE, C. (1846) *The Salon* in HONOUR, H. & FLEMING, J. (1984) *A World History of Art*, Seventh Edition, 2005, London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, p.670.

BAXANDALL, M. (1985) *Patterns of Intention*, Yale University Press, London, p.137.

BAXTER, E. (1988), 'A Footnote to the Festival of Plagiarism', *Variant*, No. 5, pp.26-30.

BEAGLES, J. (1997) 'I cannot be arsed to spend all my time and money on art, there are more important things', in *StopStop*, Vol. 1, Glasgow, pp. 67 – 70.

BEAGLES, J. (1997) Under the Central Belt, *Variant*, Vol.2, No.2, Spring, pp.9-10.

BEAGLES, J. (1998) 'Make me wanna holler, through up both my hands', *Variant*, Vol.2, No.5, Spring, pp.2-3.

BEAGLES, J. (1998) 'Back to the old school', *Variant*, Vol.2, No.6, Autumn, pp.2-3.

BECKER, H S. (1982) *Art Worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.

BELLANY, J. (2003) 'Tartan Army and Bellany the Brave', *Tate Arts and Culture*, July/Aug 2003, Issue 6, p.48.

BENJAMIN, W. (1928) *One-Way Street*. (In: Benjamin, W. *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Verso, London, 1997.)

- BERGER, J. (1972) *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin, London.
- BIRRELL, R. (2001a) 'Introduction' *Degree Show Painting catalogue*, Glasgow School of Art, 2001.
- BIRRELL, R. (2001b) 'Death Scenes: Jean-Paul Marat, Charlotte Corday, Nancy Spungen, Sid Vicious', in *St Andrews Citizen: Homage to Dr Jean-Paul Marat*, Aura, St Andrews.
- BIRRELL, R. (2002) 'One-Way Street: Reflections of a Solitary Walker', unpublished draft text for *October* project catalogue (in press).
- BIRRELL, R. and FINLAY, A. (eds.) *Justified Sinners*, Edinburgh: Pocketbooks/Canongate.
- BOLD, A. (1963a) 'Introduction to the Paintings of Alexander Moffat and John Bellany by Alan Bold at Castle Terrace Railings' [self-published leaflet].
- BOLD, A. (1963b) 'A Kind of Realism', *Gambit*, Autumn, Edinburgh University Students' Representative Council.
- BOLD, A. (1964a) 'Preface', *Rocket* No.2, February.
- BOLD, A. (1964b) 'Robert Crozier by Alan Bold', *Rocket* No.3, March.
- BOLD, A. (1971) 'Introduction', *Scottish Realism*, Edinburgh: Scottish Arts Council.
- BOLD, A. (1984) (ed.) 'Introduction', *Aesthetics in Scotland*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, pp. 7-15.
- BRADLEY, W. (1993) 'Blow Your Mind', in *Suspended Points No.3*, (catalogue essay for Joanne Tatham & Tom O'Sullivan's 'Blow Your Mind'), Collective Gallery, Edinburgh.
- BRADLEY, W. (1997a) 'On the Beauty of Several Missed Allegiances (after H D Thoreau)', in *StopStop*, Vol. 1, Glasgow, pp. 51 – 52.
- BRADLEY, W. (1997b) 'Fables of the Deconstruction', in *StopStop*, Vol. 1, Glasgow, pp. 71 – 73.
- BROTHERHOOD, I. (1984) 'The Undergrowth of Criticism', *Variant*, No.1, p.4.
- BROWN, I. (1984) 'The Permanent Curfew of Time and Space', *Variant*, No.1, pp. 8-10.
- BROWN, A. & GIBBON WILLIAMS, A (1993) *The Bigger Picture: A History of Scottish Art*, London: BBC Books.
- BUCHLOH, B. (1981) 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting', *October*, Vol.16, Spring 1981, The MIT Press, pp.39-68.
- BUCHLOH, B., FOSTER, H., FRASER, A., JOSELIT, D., KRAUSS, R., et al. (2002) 'Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism', *October*, The MIT Press, Issue 100, Spring 2002. pp. 200–228.
- BURGIN, V. (1986) 'Diderot, Barthes, *Vertigo*', *The End of Art Theory*, Macmillan, London, pp.119.



BYERS, M & MITCHELL, I. R. (2007) *Red Clydeside: A History of the Labour Movement in Glasgow 1910-1932*, Glasgow Digital Library. Available at: <http://gdl.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/redclyde/index.html> (Accessed: 9 July 2009).

CALCUTT, J. (1996) *Full Fathom Five*, (catalogue essay) Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, pp. 3 - 7.

CALCUTT, J. (2000) 'A Touching Vision', *Shadow Fragments* (Craig Mulholland catalogue essay), Duncan R. Miller Fine Art, London, p.2.

CALCUTT, J. (2001a) 'There and Then', in *Here and Now – Scottish Art 1990 – 2001*, Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee, pp. 21-24

CALCUTT, J. (2001b), *Diplomatic Immunity* MFA catalogue, Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, p.10.

CALCUTT, J. (2001) 'Killing Time', in *Kenny Hunter – Invisible Republic* exhibition catalogue, Glasgow Print studio, Glasgow.

CALCUTT, J (2001) 'Views of the West Coast of Scotland', Cove Park, Helensburgh.

CARRELL, C. (1981) (ed.) *Seven Poets*, Glasgow: Third Eye Centre.

CARRELL, C. (1985) (ed.), *The Visual Arts in Glasgow: Tradition and Transformation*, Glasgow and London: Third Eye Centre and *Art Review* magazine.

CARRELL, C. (1988) (ed.) *Douthwaite: Paintings and Drawings 1951-88*, Glasgow: Third Eye Centre

CARRIER, D. (1987) *Artwriting*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

CARRIER, D. (1991) *Principles of Art History Writing*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, USA, p.5.

CARROLL, L. (2008) 'The Artist as Critic: A Parodic Reading of Robert Morris's Writing and Minimalist Sculpture', *University of Toronto Art Journal*, Vol 1. [Online] Available at: <http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/UTAJ/article/view/4846> (Accessed: 1 September 2010).

CARROLL, N. (2009) *On Criticism*, New York and London: Routledge.

CAW, J. L. (1908) *Scottish Painting, Past and Present, 1620 -1908*, Edinburgh: T. C. and E. C. Jack.

CHAMBERS, K and CHAMBERS, T. (2010) Interview with the author, 26 February.

CHARLESWORTH, J.J. (2003) 'The Dysfunction of Criticism', *Art Monthly*, Issue 269, September 2003, pp.1-4.

CLARK, W. (1985) 'The British Art Show', insert in *Variant*, No.2, Summer.

CLARK, W. & FRENCH, L. (1996) *Variant Objectives*, <http://www.ndirect.co.uk/~variant/>

CLARK, W. (1986) 'The new spirit in art marketing', *Edinburgh Review*, No.73, Edinburgh: Polygon, pp.65-67.

COLLINGS, M. (2001) 'How Ordinary People Learn About Art' and 'Rocking Marxists' in *Art Crazy Nation*, 21 Publishing, London, pp. 117 – 130.

CROZIER, R. (1964a) 'Drawing Room Painting in Edinburgh', *Rocket* No.2, February.

CROZIER, R. (1964b) 'Painting in the Scientific Age', *Rocket* No.4, March.

CROZIER, R. (1964c) 'Home-Made Pop', *Rocket Booster*.

CROZIER, R. (2009) Interview with the author, 20 May.

CURRIE, K. (1982) 'The Dying Gasps of Bourgeois Art', *Stigma*, No.2, November, Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art Students Representative Council.

CURRIE, K. (1983) 'Art and Social Commitment', *Stigma*, No.3, February, Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art Students Representative Council.

CURRIE, K. (1986) 'New Glasgow Painting in Context', *Edinburgh Review*, No.72, Edinburgh: Polygon, pp.71-74.

CURRIE, K. (1988) 'Letter to the Editor', *Variant*, No.4, Winter/Spring, p.40.

CURRIE, K. (2002) Interview with the author, 16 August.

CURSITER, S. (1949) *Scottish Art*, London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd.

DAVIES, G. (1961) *The Democratic Intellect*, reprint, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.

DEMARCO, R. (1970) *Strategy: Get Arts* (exhibition catalogue), Edinburgh: Richard Demarco Gallery Ltd.

DEMARCO, R. (1971) 'In the Serious Light of Day', *Scottish International*, December, Edinburgh: Scottish International Review Ltd.

DEMARCO, R. (1972), *Parasol*, October, Edinburgh: The Richard Demarco Gallery Ltd.

DEMARCO, R. (1973) 'Parasol: Magazine of The Richard Demarco Gallery', in: *Scottish International*, February, Edinburgh: Scottish International Review Ltd.

DEMARCO, R. (1976), *Catalogue to the 1966-1976 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary exhibition*, Edinburgh: Richard Demarco Gallery.

DEMARCO, R. (1995) *A Life in Pictures*, Aberdeenshire: Famedram.

DEMARCO, R. (2008) 'Leafing back to 1983', *AW/25*, ArtWork, Summer 2008.

DICKENS, C. (1850) 'Old Lamps for New Ones', *Household Words* 12, 15 June.

DICKSON, M. (1982a) 'Psychedelia Revisited', *Stigma*, No.2, November, Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art Students Representative Council.

DICKSON, M. (1982b) 'Adventures Up Shit Creek', *Stigma*, No.2, November, Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art Students Representative Council.

- DICKSON, M. (1983a) 'The Slop of the New', *Stigma*, No.3, February, Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art Students Representative Council.
- DICKSON, M. (1983b) 'The Arts Council and the State', *Stigma*, No.3, February, Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art Students Representative Council.
- DICKSON, M. (1984) 'Hopes and Fears: The Nearest Thing You'll Find to an Editorial Statement in this Magazine', *Variant*, No.1, pp.1-2.
- DICKSON, M. (1985a) 'Iconoclasm: Art from the War of Ideas', handout insert in *Variant*, No.2, Summer.
- DICKSON, M. (1985b) 'Three Views of the British Art Show', *Variant*, No.2, Summer, pp.4-7.
- DICKSON, M. (1985c) 'The Image is Not the Reality', Transmission Gallery text, September, in: STEPHENSON, C. & McLAUGHLAN, A. (2001), *Transmission*, Glasgow: Transmission Gallery/Black Dog, p.15.
- DICKSON, M. (1986a) 'Polemics: Glasgow Painting Now', *Edinburgh Review*, No.73, Edinburgh: Polygon, pp.60-65.
- DICKSON, M. (1986b), 'Masses of Compromise or the Germs of Sedition', *Edinburgh Review*, No.74, Edinburgh: Polygon, pp.172-175.
- DICKSON, M. (1986) 'Letter to the Editor', *Alba*, Edinburgh, p.34.
- DICKSON, M. (1987) 'Redundant Aesthetics and The Cult of Failure', *Variant*, No.3, Autumn, pp.29-31.
- DICKSON, M. (1991) 'Editorial', *Variant*, No. 9, p.7.
- DICKSON, M (1996) 'Hit the North' in STEPHENSON, C. & McLAUGHLAN, A. (2001), *Transmission*, Glasgow: Transmission Gallery/Black Dog, p.13.
- DICKSON, M (1997) 'Another Year of alienation – On the Mythology of the Artist-run Initiative', in *Occupational Hazard – Critical Writing on Recent British Art*, Black Dog Publishing, London, pp. 81 – 93.
- DICKSON, M. (2002) Interview with the author, 27 May.
- DICKSON, M. (2008) 'The Desire of the Moth for the Star: Alasdair Taylor', *The Two Alasdairs* [exh.cat], Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art, pp.10-19.
- DICKSON, M. (2010) Email correspondence with the author, 13 and 14 July.
- DONNELLY, M. (1986) 'Letter to the Editor', *Edinburgh Review*, No.74, Edinburgh: Polygon, pp.170-171.

- DUNCOMBE, S. (1997) 'Zines', *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, Reprint 2008, Bloomington: Microcosm Publishing.
- ELIOT, K. (1988) 'A Balloonist's Story', *Variant*, No.5, Summer/Autumn, pp.39-41.
- ELKINS, J. (2003) *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm/University of Chicago.
- ELKINS, J. (2000) *Our Beautiful, Dry and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing*, London: Routledge.
- ELKINS, J. and NEWMAN, M. (eds.) (2008) *The State of Art Criticism*. London: Routledge.
- FERGUSON, H. (1995), *Glasgow School of Art: The History*, Glasgow: Foulis Press.
- FIGGIS, L. (2001) 'Cathy Wilkes – Our Misfortune', review in *Transmission Gallery Newsletter*, August/September 2001, Glasgow.
- FIGGIS, L. (2010) Email correspondence with the author, 10 June.
- FINDLAY, J. (1994) 'Fuck the Police; New Art as Subculture' in *New Art in Scotland* exhibition catalogue, CCA, Glasgow, pp. 18 – 24.
- FORD, S. (1995) *The Realization and Suppression of the Situationist International: An Annotated Bibliography 1972-1992*, Edinburgh: AK Press.
- FRIED, M (1998) *Art and Objecthood; Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- FRIEZE (1991) 'Northern Lights', *Frieze*, Issue 1.
- GAGE, E. (1977) *The Eye in the Wind – Contemporary Scottish Painting since 1945*, London: Collins.
- GAMBONI, D (1993a) 'Critics on Criticism', in Gee, M, *Art Criticism Since 1900*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, p.38-47.
- GAYFORD, M & WRIGHT, K. (1998) 'Introduction', *The Penguin Book of Art Writing*, p.xiii.
- GILLHAM, B. (2000), *The Research Interview*, Continuum, London.
- GLEN, D. (1999) *Selected Scottish and Other Essays*, Kirkcaldy: Akros Publications.
- GORDON, D. (1991), 'Northern Lights', *Frieze*, Issue 1, September/October , *Frieze Magazine Archive* [Online] Available at: [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/northern\\_lights/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/northern_lights/) (Accessed: 31 July 2009).
- GRAY, A. (1981) *Lanark, A Life in Four Books*, Canongate, Edinburgh, p.485 (2002 edition).
- GREENBERG, C. (1995) *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-69*, Vol.4, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- HARDING, D (1995) '1989' in STEPHENSON, C. & McLAUGHLAN, A. (2001), *Transmission*, Glasgow: Transmission Gallery/Black Dog, p.27.
- HARE, B. (1992) *Contemporary Painting in Scotland*, Sydney: Craftsman House.

- HARRISON, C. & WOOD, P. (eds.) (1992) 'Introduction: Ideas of the Postmodern', *Art in Theory 1900 – 1990*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- HARRISON, C. (2001) 'The Trouble with Writing', *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language*, London: The MIT Press.
- HARTLEY, K. (1989) *Scottish Art Since 1900*, Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland.
- HOME, S. / ELIOT, K. (1985), 'Nihilism, Philosophy Without Meaning', *Smile*, Issue 8, November, London.
- HOME, S. (1987) 'Multiple Names', *Smile*, Issue 10, London: Bedlam Press.
- HOME, S. (1988) *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War*, London: Aporia Press and Unpopular Books. Reprint, Stirling: A K Press, 1991.
- HOME, S. (1991) *Neoist Manifestos*, Stirling: A K Press.
- HOME, S. / ELIOT, K. (1987) 'Plagiarism as Negation in Culture', *Desire in Ruins* (exh. leaflet). Reprint in STEPHENSON, C. & McLAUGHLAN, A. (2001), *Transmission*, Glasgow: Transmission Gallery, p.22.
- HOME, S. (1995) *Neoism, Plagiarism and Praxis*, Edinburgh: AK Press.
- HUTCHISON, R. E. (1973) 'Dialogue', *A View of the Portrait* [exh. cat.], Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland.
- JONES, B. (1987) 'Why Plagiarism?', *Variant*, Issue 3, Autumn, pp.15-16.
- KAY, F. (2009) *An Equal Stillness*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- KRAUSS, R. (1980) 'Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary', *October*, Vol.13, Summer, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp.36-40.
- KRAUSS, R. (1998) (ed.) *October: The Second Decade 1986-96*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- KRAVITZ, P. (1984) 'Editorial', *Edinburgh Review*, Issue 67/68, Edinburgh: Polygon, p.3.
- KRAVITZ, P. (1986) 'Editorial', *Edinburgh Review*, Issue 72, Edinburgh: Polygon, p.3.
- LEAPMAN, M. (1994) 'Obituary: Brian Redhead', *The Independent*, 24 January [Online]. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-brian-redhead-1409045.html> (Accessed: 2 April 2010).
- LOWNDES, S. (2003) *Social Sculpture*, Glasgow: Stopstop Publishing.
- MACDIARMID, H. (1984) *Aesthetics in Scotland*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing.
- MACDONALD, M. (1995) (ed.) *Nothing is Altogether Trivial: An Anthology of Writing from the Edinburgh Review*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- MACDONALD, M. (2000), *Scottish Art*, London: Thames & Hudson

- MACDONALD, M. (2009), 'Sir Patrick Geddes and the Scottish Generalist Tradition', *Sir Patrick Geddes Memorial Lecture*, Transcript of a lecture by the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland and the Saltire Society, 20 May [Online]. Available at: <http://kosmoid.net/planning/geddeslectures> (Accessed 27.03.11).
- MACMILLAN, D. (1993) *The Paintings of Steven Campbell: The Story So Far*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing.
- MACMILLAN, D. (2000) *Scottish Art 1460-2000*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing.
- MAILER, N. (1974) *The Faith of Graffiti*, New York: Praeger Publishers.
- MAROWITZ, C. (1963) 'Edinburgh Happenings', reprint in BIRELL, R. and FINLAY, A. (eds.) *Justified Sinners*, Edinburgh: Pocketbooks/Canongate, 2002.
- MARTIN, J. (2000) *The Richard Demarco Gallery Catalogue Designs 1966-1990*, Kingston-upon-Thames: The Stanley Picker Gallery/Kingston University.
- McINTYRE, C. (1985) 'Review: Francesco Clemente, Steven Campbell at the Fruitmarket Gallery', *Variant*, No.2, Summer, pp.26-27.
- McKEE, F. (2001) 'Photosynthesizing' in *Pipilotti Rist: Show A Leg* [exh.cat], Glasgow: Tramway, pp. 5 -32 & 49-62.
- McKEE, F. (2002) Interview with the author, 16 July.
- McKEE, F. (2002) *Figure*, (catalogue essay for Dorothy Cross), Dublin: Temple Bar Properties.
- McKENZIE, R. (2009) Email correspondence with the author, 21 August.
- McLUHAN, M. (1994) *Understanding Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA (reissue of 1964 edition),
- MERMOZ, G. (1989) 'Rhetoric and Episteme: Writing about art in the wake of Post-Structuralism', *Art History* 12, pp. 496-509.
- MOFFAT, A. (2002) Interview with the author, 25 July.
- MOFFAT, A. (1976) 'FAS', *Art Monthly*, October.
- MOFFAT, A. (1977) 'Introduction', *Michael Docherty, John Kirkwood, Eileen Lawrence, Derek Roberts*, [exh.cat], Edinburgh: Scottish Arts Council.
- MOFFAT, A. (1978) 'Introduction', *Alan Johnston*, [exh.cat], Oxford: Museum of Modern Art.
- MOFFAT, A. (1981) 'Alexander Moffat Interviewed by Timothy Hyman', *Seven Poets*, [exh. cat], Glasgow: Third Eye Centre Ltd.
- MOFFAT, A. (1982) *Pictures of Ourselves*, [exh.cat], Edinburgh: Scottish Arts Council.

- MOFFAT, A. (1984) 'New Painting and Old Painting: A Precarious Spontaneity or an Outmoded Tradition?', in BENNETT, N. (ed.) *The British Art Show: Old Allegiances and New Directions 1979-1984*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain/Orbis.
- MOFFAT, A. (1985), 'Telling Stories: A New Figuration in Glasgow 1980-85', *New Image Glasgow*, [exh.cat], Glasgow: Third Eye Centre.
- MOFFAT, A. (1986), 'Artists in Exile', *Edinburgh Review*, No.72, Edinburgh: Polygon, pp.82-86.
- MOFFAT, A. (1987) 'Alexander Moffat', *Peter de Francia - Painter and Professor: An Anthology*, [exh.cat], Camden Arts Centre, London: Arkwright Arts Trust.
- MOFFAT, A. (2002) Interview with the author, 24 July.
- MOFFAT, A. & RIACH, A. (2008) *Arts of Resistance: Poets, Portraits and Landscapes of Modern Scotland*, Edinburgh: Luath Press.
- MOFFAT, A. (2009) E-mail to the author, 19 May.
- MORE, F. (1984) "'Scottish Art Now' and Cultural Guerillas", *Variant*, No.1, pp.11-13.
- MORGAN, (2002) 'Letter 3' in Birrell, R. and Finlay, A. (eds.) *Justified Sinners*, Edinburgh: Pocketbooks/Canongate.
- MORIARTY, M. (1991) *Roland Barthes*, Polity Press, Oxford.
- MULHOLLAND, N. (2002) 'Learning from Glasvegas: Scottish Art after 'The '90'', *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History*, Scottish Society for Art History, Volume 7.
- MULHOLLAND, N. (2003) 'Leaving Glasvegas', *Matters*, Issue 17, 2003, p.10.
- MULHOLLAND, N. (2003) *The Cultural Devolution*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- MULHOLLAND, N. (2009) 'Scottish Independents' [Online]. Available at: <http://www.slideshare.net/neilmulholland/scottish-independents> (Accessed: 2 April, 2010).
- MURRAY, C. (2003) *Key Writers on Art: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century*, London: Routledge.
- MURRAY, C. (2003) *Key Writers on Art: The Twentieth Century*, London: Routledge.
- NORMAND, T. (2000) 'Scotland, nationalism and modernism', *The Modern Scot: Modernism and Nationalism in Scottish Art, 1928 – 1955*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- NEWMAN, A. (2001) *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*, New York: Soho Press Inc.
- OLIVER, C. (1960a) 'A Personal Choice from the Royal Academy Exhibition', *Glasgow Herald*, 29 April, p.12.
- OLIVER, C. (1960b) 'Pictures of Life and Variety', *Glasgow Herald*, 8 October, p.6.
- OLIVER, C. (1960c) 'Colourist in a White Gallery', *Glasgow Herald*, 30 May 1960, p.7.

OLIVER, C. (1960d) 'Multum in Parvo in Art Show', *Glasgow Herald*.\*

OLIVER, C. (1961a) 'Evocative Use of Colour', *Glasgow Herald*, 16 May.\*

OLIVER, C. (1961b) 'The house that youth built', *The Guardian*, 24 April, p.8.

OLIVER, C. (1961c) 'Finding Their Feet', *The Guardian*, 27 November.\*

OLIVER, C. (1961d) 'Young Glasgow Group', *The Guardian*, 29 June.

OLIVER, C. (1962) 'Watercolours in Scotland', *The Guardian*, 30 January.\*

OLIVER, C. (1963) 'Scottish Painting', *The Guardian*, 9 October.\*

OLIVER, C. (c.1964/65a) 'Contemporary Exhibition at Inverleith',

OLIVER, C. (1964b) 'Plus/Minus Thirty', *The Guardian*, 17 November.\*

OLIVER, C. (1964c) 'Glasgow Exhibitions', *The Guardian*, 5 May.\*

OLIVER, C. (1965a) 'Scottish Exhibitions', *The Guardian*, 30 March.\*

OLIVER, C. (1965b) 'Joan Eardley exhibition', *The Guardian*, 15 November.\*

OLIVER, C. (1968) 'The Glasgow School in the 'Forties'', *The Times*, 13 September.\*

OLIVER, C. (1970a) 'Napoleon in a Scottish Pond' *The Guardian*, 18 August, p.8.

OLIVER, C. (1970b) 'Dada for the 'seventies'', *The Guardian*, 24 August, p.8.

OLIVER, C. (1970c) 'Alive in a New Way', *The Guardian*, 3 July, p.8.

OLIVER, C. (1970d) 'What is to be Done About the Art Schools?', *Scottish International*, Issue 10, May, Edinburgh: Scottish International Review Ltd.

OLIVER, C. (1970e) 'Portraits at the New 57 Gallery', *The Guardian*, 21 March, p.8.

OLIVER, C. (1971) *Romanian Art Today* (exh. cat), August-September, Edinburgh: Richard Demarco Gallery.

OLIVER, C. (1972) 'Man of Sound Vision', *The Guardian*, 26 June, p.8.

OLIVER, C. (1974) 'Aachen International 70/74', *The Guardian*, 26 August, p.6.

OLIVER, C. (1978a) *Painters in Parallel* (exh.cat), Edinburgh: Scottish Arts Council.

OLIVER, C. (1978b) *Crawford and Company: Selected Work 1928-1978* (exh. cat), Glasgow: Third Eye Centre.

OLIVER, C. (1980) *James Cowie* (Modern Scottish Painters), Number 7, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

OLIVER, C. (1986) 'Tom Macdonald', *Tom Macdonald 1914-1985: paintings, drawings and theatre design* (exh. cat), Glasgow: Third Eye Centre.



- OLIVER, C. (1988) 'Pat Douthwaite' in CARRELL, C. (ed.) *Douthwaite Paintings and Drawings 1951-1988*, (exh.cat), Glasgow: Third Eye Centre.
- OLIVER, C. (1998) 'Introduction', *The Seeing Eye: The Life and Work of George Oliver*, Glasgow: Glasgow City Libraries and Archives.
- OLIVER, C. (1999) 'Towards the Citizens Style', *Magic in the Gorbals*, Aberdeenshire: Famedram.
- OLIVER, C. (2001) 'Memories of GSA 1940-44', *Art Booms with the Guns: The War Years at GSA* (exh.cat), Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art.
- OLIVER, C. (2002) Interview with the author, 29 August.
- OLIVER, C. (2004) 'Art', *States of Scotland 2004*, Glasgow: ICS Books.
- OLIVER, C. (2006a) 'Cordelia Oliver (Patrick) Edinburgh Festival Drawings 1949-1960', *Press Release*, Glasgow School of Art, July-September.
- OLIVER, C. (2006b), 'Cordelia Oliver: Interview with Free Association', *Free Association*, Glasgow: Free Association.
- OLIVER, C. (2008) 'Is it Just Me?', *AW/25*, ArtWork, Summer 2008.
- O'SULLIVAN, J. (1986) 'Letter to the Editor', *Edinburgh Review*, No.74, Edinburgh: Polygon, pp.171-172.
- OWENS, C. (1994) *Beyond Recognition*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- PAPADAKIS, A. (1987) *The Post-Avant-Garde Painting in the Eighties (Art and Design Vol.3, No.7/8)*, London: Academy Group.
- PATRIZIO, A. (2004), in HIGGINS, C (2004) 'Reprieve for lost avant-garde masterpiece', *The Guardian*, 21 August. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2004/aug/21/edinburgh04.arts> (Accessed 27.3.11).
- PUTNAM, R. D. (1995) 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital', *Journal of Democracy*, January 1995, pp. 65-78.
- RAMSAY, G. (1996) 'Club Adorno', in *Variant*, Vol. 2, No.1, Glasgow, pp.10.
- REES, A.L. & BORZELLO, F. (eds.) (1986) 'Introduction', *The New Art History*, London: Camden Press.
- REGENT, P. (1970) 'From Peter Regent', *Scottish International*, Issue 11, September, Edinburgh: Scottish International Review Ltd.
- ROBERTSON, S. (1986) 'Letter to the Editor', *Edinburgh Review*, No.74, Edinburgh: Polygon, p.172.
- RUBENFELD, F. (2004) *Clement Greenberg: A Life*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- RUSKIN, J. (1991) *John Ruskin: Selected Writings*, London: Penguin.
- SALTZ, J. (ed.) (1998) *An Ideal Syllabus*, Frieze, London.

- SCHREYACH, M. (2008) 'The Recovery of Criticism', in Elkins, J. and Newman, M. (eds.), *The State of Art Criticism*. New York and London: Routledge.
- SHURE, R. (1972a) 'The Long Light Days of Margaret Tait', *Umbrella*, March, Volume 1, No.2, Edinburgh: The Richard Demarco Gallery.
- SHURE, R. (1972b) *Umbrella*, March, Volume 1, No.2, Edinburgh: The Richard Demarco Gallery Ltd.
- SHURE, R. (1972c) *Umbrella*, April, Volume 1, No.3, Edinburgh: The Richard Demarco Gallery Ltd.
- SHURE, R. (1972d) *Umbrella*, July, Volume 1, No.6, Edinburgh: The Richard Demarco Gallery Ltd.
- SINCLAIR, R. (1991) 'Bad Smells but no sign of the Corpse', *Windfall '91* [exh.cat]. (no page numbers).
- SINCLAIR, R. (1992a) 'Julie Roberts', *Frieze*, Issue 6, September/October. *Frieze Magazine Archive* [Online] Available at: [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/northern\\_lights/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/northern_lights/) (Accessed: 31 July 2009).
- SINCLAIR, R. (1993) 'The Morning after the Eighties', *Variant*, issue 15, Autumn, p.26.
- SINCLAIR, R. (1999) 'This is the Sound of the Suburbs: The Glasgow Model and the Cyclical Nature of Arts Communities' *Proceedings of the Global Culture and Arts Communities Symposium*, 13-17 October, Alberta, Canada: University of Alberta.
- SINCLAIR, R. (1991) 'Bad Smells but No Sign of the Corpse', *Windfall* (exhibition catalogue) Glasgow.
- SINCLAIR, R. (1992) 'This is Something for the Blunted', *In and Out, Back and Forth* (exhibition catalogue), New York, USA.
- SINCLAIR, R. (1994a) 'Faster Than A Pool of Piss On The Sidewalk', *Real Life* no.23, New York, pp. 4 - 9.
- SINCLAIR, R. (1994b) 'The Beastie Boys, Nietzsche and Masturbating as an Art Form', *New Art in Scotland* (exh. cat), CCA, Glasgow pp. 24 – 32.
- SINCLAIR, R. (2002) Interview with the author, 9 August.
- SMITHSON, R. (1967) 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', in *Artforum*, New York, USA.
- SPENCER, A. (2008) *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture*, London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd.
- STALLABRASS, J. (1999) *High Art Lite*, London:Verso.
- STALLABRASS, J. (2001) 'The Decline and Fall of Art Criticism', *High Art Lite*, Verso, London, pp. 258 - 272.
- STEPHENSON, C. & McLAUGHLAN, A. (2001), *Transmission*, Glasgow: Transmission Gallery/Black Dog.
- STEYN, J. (ed.) (1995) *Writing Art*, Pluto Press, London, Connecticut, USA.
- STIGMA (1983) 'Contents Page', *Stigma*, February, No. 3.
- STIRTON, P. (2007) 'Notes Towards a Historiography of Modern Scottish Art', *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History*, Scottish Society for Art History, Vol.12.

- SUCHIN, P. (1988) 'Post-Modernism and the Post-Modern Debate in Britain', *Variant*, No. 4, Winter/Spring, pp. 31-35.
- SUCHIN, P. (1989) 'Blend and Clash: Theories of Discretion', *Variant*, No.7, pp. 13-18.
- SUCHIN, P. (1998) 'Aspects of Art Criticism', *Variant* (Streetlevel supplement), Volume 2, Number 6, Autumn 1998.
- SUCHIN, P. (2004) 'Uncritical Curating', *Art Monthly*, June, Issue 277, p.13.
- SUTHERLAND, G. (2010) 'Cordelia Oliver', *The Scotsman*, 6 January [Online]. Available at: <http://news.scotsman.com/obituaries/Cordelia-Oliver.5957924.jp> (Accessed: 6 January 2010).
- SYLVESTER, D. (2002) *About Modern Art: Critical Essays 1948-2000*, (2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition) London: Pimlico.
- TAIT, R. (1970) 'Controversy about The Art Schools', *Scottish International*, Issue 11, September, Edinburgh: Scottish International Review Ltd.
- THOMPSON, S. (2005) 'The Case for Critical Regionalism in Recent Scottish Art Criticism', *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History*, Scottish Society for Art History, Volume 10.
- TONGE, J. (1938) *The Arts of Scotland*, London: Keagan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd.
- TONGE, J. (1942) 'Scottish Paintings' in CONNOLLY, C. (ed.), *Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art*, May, Vol.5, No.29, London: Horizon, pp.331-334.
- ULMER, G. (1983), 'The Object of Post-Criticism' in FOSTER, H. (ed). *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Bay Press, pp. 83-110.
- VARIANT (1984-1994) All issues
- VENTURI, L. (1936) *History of Art Criticism*, New York: E.P. Dutton and Co. Inc.
- WALKER, J A. (1976) "Periodicals Since 1945", *The Art Press – Two Centuries of Art Magazines*, Art Documents, No.1, Vo.1, pp 45- 52.
- WATNEY, S (1991) 'Craig Owens: "The Indignity of Speaking for Others"', in OWENS, C (1992) *Beyond Recognition*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- WATSON, R. (1985) *The Literature of Scotland*, London: Macmillan Books.
- WEINGARTEN, M. (2005) *Who's Afraid of Tom Wolfe? How New Journalism Rewrote the World*, London: Aurum Press.
- WILDE, O. (1888) 'The Critic as Artist', *Intentions*, reprint, Los Angeles: Green Integer Books, 1997.
- WILSON, S. & PILGRIM, F. (2007) 'From 'Vigorous Imagination' to Venice Biennale', *Visting Arts (Scotland Cultural Profile)*. [Online]. Available at:

[http://www.culturalprofiles.net/Scotland/Directories/Scotland\\_Cultural\\_Profile/-5518.html](http://www.culturalprofiles.net/Scotland/Directories/Scotland_Cultural_Profile/-5518.html) (Accessed: 8 August 2009).

WINTERSON, J. (2003) 'It's painting, but without the colour', *The Times*, 13 September [Online].

Available at:

[http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/pages/journalism\\_01/journalism\\_01\\_item.asp?journalism\\_01ID=170&journalism\\_01\\_Category=Visual%20Arts](http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/pages/journalism_01/journalism_01_item.asp?journalism_01ID=170&journalism_01_Category=Visual%20Arts) (Accessed: 8 February 2010).

WOLFE, T. (1975) *The Painted Word*, London: Picador.

WOLFE, T. (1975) *The New Journalism*, London: Picador.

WOODWARD, N. (1983) 'Unemployment', *Stigma*, No. 3, February, Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art Students Representative Council.

ZG (2010) 'Mission Statement' [Online]. Available at: [http://zgpress.com/?page\\_id=6](http://zgpress.com/?page_id=6) (Accessed: 17 July 2010).

\*Please note: for a number of Cordelia Oliver references from the 1960s specific page numbers (and in a small number of cases, specific dates) are not listed in the main text. In these cases the source was Oliver's own press cuttings scrapbook, on loan to the author. For texts published in the *Glasgow Herald* I have attempted wherever possible to check and cross-reference these texts with records on Google News Archive and in the microfiche records at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow. However, as many of the texts published in the *Glasgow Herald* were published anonymously as 'Our Art Critic' it has not always been possible to establish exact page numbers or to find named/authored articles by Oliver in digital searches, though the original sources (Oliver's press cuttings) were used as references. For *The Guardian* texts I used records from *The Guardian* Digital Archive, along with Oliver's press cuttings. Again, wherever possible, page numbers have been cited.

