

This document is an extract from **engage 31:**
The Past in the Present, 2012, Karen Raney (ed.).
London: engage, the National Association for
Gallery Education. All contents © The Authors
and engage, unless stated otherwise.

www.engage.org/journal

This is the Time

Past, present and future at The Glasgow School of Art

Jenny Brownrigg

Exhibitions Director, The Glasgow School of Art

The Mackintosh Museum, built in 1909, is at the heart of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's masterwork, The Glasgow School of Art's Mackintosh Building. With its high level of architectural detail inside and outside, the museum is the antithesis of the 'white cube'. This essay will explore the ways in which the contemporary exhibitions programme for the gallery space within this iconic building can create a critical exchange between past, present and future.

For someone standing here in the present moment, the architect and the presence of generations of staff, students and visitors who have moved through the building could represent the shadows in Plato's Cave. In this allegory, the cave's chained residents can see only the moving shadows on the cave wall of the objects that pass behind them. Here in Glasgow, the phantasms of 'The Immortals',¹ the 'Spook School',² 'The New Glasgow Boys',³ a series of Turner Prize winners,⁴ other high-achieving alumni and the institution being identified as the hothouse for a particular kind of artist activity leading to 'The Grit and the

Glamour',⁵ all flicker tantalisingly on the wall, or can perpetually be captured as media soundbites. Mackintosh himself is omnipresent in the city and beyond as an easily recognisable style in merchandising and souvenirs. It is even possible to buy a 'Mockintosh' moustache from the GSA tour shop.

The Mackintosh building has never been emptied of its educational activities to become a museum. In this living, working building with its community of students and staff, past, present and future exist together in a continuum. Even the lights that Mackintosh had made for the centre of the library are futuristic, designed to represent a city made of tower blocks well before this kind of architecture was invented. And whilst the school is undoubtedly proud of its history, it is on the threshold of a new phase, represented by the Sebastião Salgado-like pit directly across the street from the Mackintosh building, out of which a new glass building by Steven Holl Architects will grow over the next year.



Facing out towards the city, rather than in on itself, the art school is made up from different types of buildings across Garnethill and the city, housing undergraduate and graduate courses in Fine Art, Design and Architecture. In the early days students were trained to decorate the city through civic sculpture, buildings, and design. Present-day students might work with communities,⁶ or make work in the gaps, wastelands and overlooked spaces of the city, or create design ideas from the surrounding urban fabric.

The exhibitions programme at The Glasgow School of Art has both an internal and external audience. On one hand, as the gallery is in an educational institution, the programme must be a transparent

educational model to reflect upon and show contemporary practice in all its forms and processes. On the other hand, with over 23,000 visitors to the building in 2011/12, many citing their visit linked to interests in 'Charles Rennie Mackintosh', 'heritage' and 'the building', consideration must be made for how these visitors will respond to a contemporary programme within a Mackintosh Museum.

The challenge for the exhibitions programme is to find relevant ways to engage with all of the audiences we cater for. It is equally important that practitioners can respond creatively to the building. A past tutor, David Harding, who set up the institution's Environmental Art course, often

quoted John Latham's statement to his students: 'The context is half the work'. This statement could be considered a guide for curating a contemporary programme for the Mackintosh Museum.

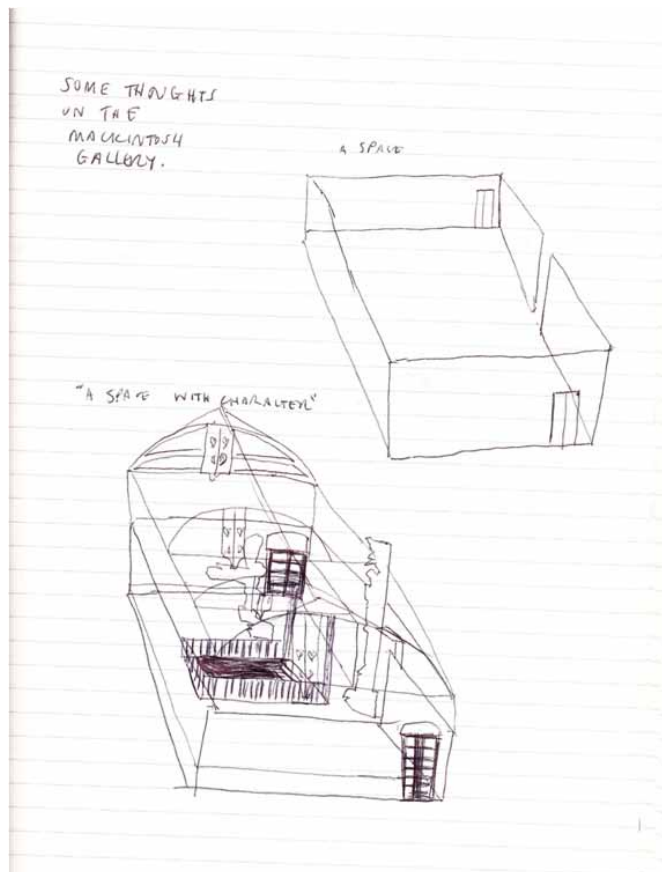
When I took up the role of Exhibitions Director three years ago, I noted down my first responses to the Mackintosh Museum, as well as the responses of others. The GSA Director, Seona Reid, in her opening speech for the historical centenary exhibition *The Flower and The Green Leaf*⁷ (2009) noted that, '... the contemporary often sits uncomfortably in the Mackintosh Museum'. A visiting curator also said at a meeting: 'This space has too much character.' For me, however, it is the tension to which these responses refer that make it an intriguing space to work with.

Sitting in the invigilator's chair one morning, I started to sketch the Museum in my notebook. My first diagram was full of detail – the towering statue of Nike of Samothrace; the cast of an ornate column from Chartres Cathedral; the Arts and Crafts-inspired roof; the four Japanese architecture-inspired posts around the stairwell that look as though they support another structure, but in fact support air. I then made a second drawing where I emptied the Museum space of all detail. The first, I called: 'a space with character', the second, simply 'a space'. These two drawings could represent the Mackintosh Museum and a 'white cube' gallery. In a third drawing I notated the floor area. As the point of entry and stairwell is located in the middle of the Museum, the floor is

split into two distinct areas, in essence two 'stages'. One side I labelled 'CALL', the other 'RESPONSE'. These early visual responses led me to the idea that the exhibitions programme could stage conversations between different elements and readings.

'Call and response' is perhaps best illustrated by *The Erratics* (2011), an exhibition of Danish ceramicist Lotte Glob's work,⁸ with responses by Nick Evans and Ruth Barker. An erratic rock is a large boulder that has been transported by a glacier, coming to rest on rock of a different nature. For this exhibition, the title was used as a metaphor for the journey that Lotte Glob's ceramic works made from her 'sculpture croft' in Sutherland and as a way to describe how they came to rest in the Mackintosh Museum on a series of works by Nick Evans. The pattern used on the tables and pedestals Evans made came from a Tahitian axe handle. Called a 'K figure pattern' it is dedicated to the god of craft and it shows rows of multiple interlocking headless figures. This pattern continued around the Museum walls. Exhibited in this manner, Glob's works became offerings within the museum space. The exhibition was closed by a performance by Ruth Barker, *And The Three Mothers Ask: Don't You Know Me*, which provided a final response to Glob's work.

The interaction between past and present was inherent in the first curatorial question for the programme: 'How can the contemporary sit with the historical?' The Mackintosh Museum is a space



that can contain duality and tension. The programme therefore had to accommodate the dialectical premise that solutions can come out of potentially opposing forces. This question also created access points for the audiences. Students could gain an understanding of the relevance of the historical to their contemporary practice. Visitors seeking out the historical could gain a greater understanding of its links with contemporary practice.

Restore Us and Regain (2010),⁹ with Tommy Grace, Ged Quinn and Tony Swain, brought together three artists whose work contained references to past histories, archaic landscapes, monuments and ruins. By referencing historical detail, or times lost, the works employed contemporary methods to critique and subvert the past. *Living Today: with information from the George Orwell Archive* (2011) was a group show which presented work exploring aspects of society – politics, culture, economy, living conditions and social structures.¹⁰ The exhibition explored the challenging times of two periods – the 1930s and present day. Digital prints taken from George Orwell's original manuscript¹¹ of *The Road to Wigan Pier*¹² were exhibited on tables positioned around the heart of the central stairwell. Responses of contemporary artists to social issues were placed around them. Two commissions were part of the exhibition. The Glasgow School of Art published Eva Merz's *You, Me, Us and Them* (2011), in an edition of 500, a publication looking at women in prison and the criminal justice system in Scotland through interviews ranging from a past offender to a retired judge. GSA staff member and artist Ross Birrell returned to Wigan to find that the only remnant of Orwell in the city was the Orwell pub which was about to shut down.

In 2010 Alice Channer was commissioned to make new work for the Mackintosh Museum with the solo exhibition *Inhale, Exhale*.¹³ Channer's work often takes the form of material, particularly fabric,

which she pleats, stretches and folds. Through exhibitions, she explores the potential for galleries to have the feeling of being inhabited, paralleling the way clothes are worn on the body. The works Channer made, in a sense, 'clothed' Mackintosh's work. Italian marble 'cuffs' were placed around the banisters of the museum like bangles. Aluminium casts from severed waistbands of leggings formed shapes like smoke rings that were suspended on coloured elastic from the beams. Paper treated with water, puckered to resemble the texture and directional stripe of seersucker material, were hung over the beams at both sides, resembling a garment hung over a shoulder. Channer used these references to the immediacy and intimacy of the worn garment in an attempt to make her own and Mackintosh's works exist in the present. She stated that:

'... [my] response to the historical, ideological and political associations of Mackintosh's building is to simply position my own time and place alongside them. I can do this because for me the gallery is another body, person, entity or being, alongside myself rather than above or below me. In this way I have approached Inhale, Exhale as a two person show...The body becomes the beams, banisters, floor, ceiling, walls and volume of Mackintosh's Museum.'

Channer was insistent that the exhibition did not claim to be 'site specific', and was 'responsive' but not a response. The work was able to achieve this as it moved away from the context as well as with it, sometimes in harmony, at other times against.

Dealing with the 'personality' of Mackintosh, Dutch artist Folkert de Jong¹⁴ made a new installation of figurative sculptures for the Mackintosh Museum, inspired by the figures of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his wife Margaret MacDonald Mackintosh. The exhibition title and this new body of work, collectively entitled *The Immortals*,¹⁵ referred to the name they gave to their peer group that included Herbert McNair and Margaret's sister Frances. The work was also inspired by a small photograph album called 'The Immortals', held by The Glasgow School of Art Archives and Collections, of Mackintosh and his peers out for the day to a Scottish farm.

Folkert de Jong is an artist who freely mixes up times, materials and cultural references in his work. By considering the sculptural figures he made as actors on the two 'stages' of the Mackintosh Museum, de Jong explored the 'theatricality' of the space. His work also made connections with the Museum's past function as the drawing studio in the art school, which originally housed all the figurative classical plaster casts for students to learn from. De Jong's figures, made from synthetic materials such as industrial styrofoam and polyurethane insulation foam, were placed alongside traditional plaster casts including *The Rebel Slave* and *Dying Slave*.

A number of recent projects have explored perceptions of hierarchy in relation to the museum space. Henry Coombes' *Magic Towards Your Face* (2010) used the museum as a film set. His film



explored the power dynamics between a curator and an artist making work for an exhibition, in which the scenario turned nightmarish. Coombes played the role of the curator. For the installation, the artist's paintings were hung in a traditional museum order, whilst the film, the underbelly of the show, was shown in one of the film's props, an outsized crate turned into a viewing room.

In 2011 the exhibition *The Invigilators* inverted the normally passive role of the invigilators employed in the Museum by inviting twenty of them to make work for the space.¹⁶ They had all had plenty of time to consider the space from the point of view of the invigilator's chair. Some made work about 'silence'. Some reflected upon the space and the art objects it contains; others responded to the unique architecture and atmosphere of the

Mackintosh Museum and inspirations of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Some examined the role of the invigilator as a form of art labour. Geneva Sills in her series *The Glasgow Four* photographed four of her fellow artists from the show. Each was assigned a role from *The Glasgow Four* (Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Margaret Macdonald, James Herbert McNair and Frances Macdonald). Nils Guadagnin in his work *Engram* made an intervention in the Mackintosh Museum which questioned the evolution of the space into a white cube.¹⁷ The word 'Blackout' was carved into the museum wall, down to the level of chipboard, revealing the numerous layers of paint which had covered the walls, the transformations this space has undergone over the years.

The notion of time and generations has been explored in two different projects. The group show *Live Your Questions Now* (2011)¹⁸ coincided with Glasgow's hosting of the British Art Show 7, *In the Days of the Comet*. The survey show is recognised as a way to frame the works of wide range of artists in terms of age or geography. Increasingly, survey shows predominantly focus on emergent artists in their 20s and 30s.¹⁹ *Live your Questions Now* was a survey exhibition of Scottish, UK and international artists over 60 years old, and gave the opportunity to look at the longevity of careers, and the continuing questions that propel practice forward. The exhibition title came from a quote from a letter Rainer Maria Rilke wrote to a young poet who had asked him for criticism on his poems

and advice: 'Live your questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.' (*Letters to a Young Poet*, 1934)

Dr. Sarah Lowndes dealt directly with the phantasms of past generations and The Glasgow School of Art's histories in *Studio 58: Women Artists in Glasgow since World War II*. The title of the exhibition came from the studio located on the top floor of the Mackintosh Building that historically was the dedicated workspace for women students. *Studio 58* contextualised the work of contemporary women artists in Glasgow through documenting and displaying the little known and under-represented lineage of women's art in the city from 1939 onwards, within the frame of the city's art school where all of the artists included in the exhibition either studied or taught.²⁰ *Studio 58* was organised around four





thematic strands: landscape/still life, body/self, printed matter and photography/film. The artists include Margaret Morris, Mary Armour, Ivy Proudfoot, and Kathleen Mann, as well as those that followed them including Joan Eardley, Margot Sandeman, Bet Low and Sam Ainsley and younger artists such as Cathy Wilkes, Claire Barclay, Victoria Morton, Hayley Tompkins and Karla Black. Rather

than being chronologically presented, the works in the show stepped out of this formal constraint, and allowed for conversations and connections between content and approach.

If there is a particular ideal that Mackintosh wished to convey through this building, it is the growth of knowledge, represented by the symbol of a seed cut into the Museum rafters. As my time here progresses, so does my own approach and lines of questioning towards the curation of this space which is the antithesis of the 'white cube'. Rather than restricting the discourse to a particular heritage theme, time period or personality such as Mackintosh, the multi-layered specificity of this building encourages this layering of past, present and future, leading to an exhibitions programme that engages with a cyclical rather than linear understanding of time.

Notes

1 The name for Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his wider peer group, as coined by themselves

2 An initially derogatory name for the Glasgow Four – Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Herbert MacNair, Margaret and Frances MacDonald – as some critics derided their style for incorporating 'ghostly' figures in their designs

3 A group of figurative painters in Glasgow in 1980s including Stephen Campbell, Ken Currie and Peter Howson, who had all been students at the Glasgow School of Art

4 Turner Prize winners who have studied at GSA include Douglas Gordon (1996), Simon Starling (2005), Martin Boyce (2011)

5 BBC Scotland programme from 'Imagine' series, 2012. Directed by Colin Murray, the programme '... explores the story of a group of artists and curators who stormed the international art world and turned their home city of Glasgow into a global capital for contemporary art.'

6 For example, 'Get Go' is a co-designing programme led by The Glasgow School of Art Product Design course with the Wyndford housing estate, North Glasgow

7 *The Flower and the Green Leaf* exhibition explored the lives and work of GSA's staff and students during the early 20th century

8 Lotte Glob (born 1944) is a Danish ceramic artist living in the north of Scotland in Sutherland.

9 The exhibition title is from Book 1, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

10 Matei Bejenaru (RO), Ross Birrell (UK), Francis Cape (USA), Jens Haaning (DK), David Harding (UK), Ângela Ferreira (PT), Eva Merz (DK)

11 Information came from the George Orwell Archive, University College London

12 *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) was commissioned by Victor Gollancz and published by the Left Book Club and documented Orwell's observations of poverty in the North East of

England before the Second World War

13 *Inhale, Exhale* was part of Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art 2010. A publication is available, with text by Michelle Cotton

14 Folkert de Jong (b. 1972) studied at the Rijksakademie of Fine Art in Amsterdam. In 2012 he designed costumes and props for a theatre play *Troilus and Cressida* by the Wooster group and The Royal Shakespeare Company. De Jong has exhibited widely internationally, including solo exhibitions at James Cohan Gallery New York; Luis Adelantado Gallery Mexico City; Kunsthalle Winterthur, Switzerland; Chisenhale Gallery, London, UK. Group exhibitions include *Shape of Things to Come: New Sculpture*, The Saatchi Gallery, London, UK (2011); *Monumental: Contemporary Figurative Sculpture* Herbert Johnson Museum of Art New York (2010) and the Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, Australia (2010)

www.studiofolkertdejong.com

15 *The Immortals* was commissioned by The Glasgow School of Art in association with Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art 2012 with support from the Mondriaan Fund

16 At The Glasgow School of Art Exhibitions Department, the workforce of invigilators is made up mostly from current students and GSA graduates. They come from all disciplines, and all year groups, undergraduate and postgraduate. From working with the Department in this capacity, they gain professional development and also the

chance to spend time in the space thinking about the work on show, perhaps thinking how it links to what they are making

17 In neuropsychology an engram is a hypothetical means by which memory traces are stored as physical changes in the brain

18 Sam Ainsley (UK), Helena Almeida (Pt), Alasdair Gray (UK), Joan Jonas (USA), Běla Kolářová (Czech Republic), Michael Kidner (UK), Lygia Pape (Brazil)

19 Examples include: *Young London*, V22, London (2011), an exhibition of 35 young London artists; *Nought to Sixty* (2008), the ICA survey show celebrating the ICA's 60th anniversary, presented work of emerging artists over Great Britain and Ireland; and *The Generational: Younger than Jesus* (2009), the New Museum in New York, exhibiting work of 145 artists who were under 33 years old

20 *Studio 58: Women Artists in Glasgow since World War II*, edited by Dr. Sarah Lowndes and published by The Glasgow School of Art (2012), includes accounts of several generations of women artists who have either studied or taught at The Glasgow School of Art

Images

1 'The Immortals' L-R: Katherine Cameron, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Janet Aitken, John Keppie, Agnes Raeburn, Jessie Keppie, Frances Macdonald, Herbert McNair, Margaret Macdonald. Courtesy of The Glasgow School of Art Archives and Collections

2 Page from Notebook, (2010), Jenny Brownrigg

3 (top left) Folkert de Jong, *The Immortals*, 2012, Mackintosh Museum, The Glasgow School of Art. Photo: Janet Wilson. Courtesy The Glasgow School of Art and the artist

4 (top right) Folkert de Jong, *The Immortals*, 2012, Mackintosh Museum, The Glasgow School of Art. Photo: Janet Wilson. Courtesy The Glasgow School of Art and the artist

5 (bottom left) Nils Guadagnin, *Engram*, 2012 from the exhibition *The Invigilators*, Mackintosh Museum, The Glasgow School of Art 2012. Photo: Janet Wilson

6 (bottom right) Ruth Barker, still from *And The Three Mothers Ask: Don't You Know Me?*, 2011. Performance as part of *The Erratics*, Mackintosh Museum, the Glasgow School of Art, 8 April 2011. Photo: Janet Wilson

7 Henry Coombes, *Magic Towards Your Face*, (film still), 2010. Photo: Janet Lindsay Wilson ©Henry Coombes 2010

8 Alice Channer, *Inhale, Exhale*, 2010, Mackintosh Museum, The Glasgow School of Art. Photo: Alan Dimmick