

***FREE CULTURE!* Michael Barr, RSA New Contemporaries, (5-30 March 2016) The Royal Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture, The Mound, Edinburgh EH2 2EL, Scotland**

The Scottish Saltire and Union Jack flags flutter in the breeze. They fly directly above a line of contemporary banners fixed between the columns of the Royal Scottish Academy, a neo-classical William Henry Playfair-designed building at The Mound in central Edinburgh. These banners are part of Michael Barr's '*FREE CULTURE!*' project and echo the colours of the Cuban flag. Indeed, the star from the Cuban flag is used in the central banner, which proclaims '*Here Today*'. The linking banner message – '*Grand Art Sale - Here Today*', renders the star reminiscent of a neon price tag from a market stall. Barr's artwork is to be found at the rear of the building, above the workers' entrance. A tartan-trewed attendant is stationed inside, directing traffic to lower galleries but also there to answer the back door to the many people knocking to ask where the art sale is.

This building is steeped in history and hierarchy. Playfair's buildings, including the Old College of University of Edinburgh and City Observatory, Calton Hill, are synonymous with Scotland's *capital*, affording it the title of the '*Athens of the North*'. Even the tartan traditionally worn by public workers at National Galleries was specially designed by its previous Director, Sir Timothy Clifford (National Galleries Director 1984-2006), after Government tartan (before Scottish Devolution) and Black Watch military tartan. The RSA's mission is the '*promotion of visual arts and architecture*'. RSA New Contemporaries, now in its eighth year, is a survey show, selected by a panel of the RSA's elected Academicians, of works by graduates from all of Scotland's art schools.

At the reception area, Barr's particular '*promotion*' becomes clearer. On asking the receptionist for information, a white wooden box is proffered. The lid is removed to reveal a pile of A4 sheets emblazoned with the slogan '*FREE CULTURE!*' On the reverse of the prints, Barr has distilled a précis of Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt's book *To Defend the Revolution is to Defend Culture: The Cultural Policy of the Cuban Revolution* (2015, PM Press). Gordon-Nesbitt's research has charted the centrality of the arts to the Cuban Revolution, examining the post-1959 relationship of artist and cultural production to State and population. In the first place, a network of museums and galleries was extended across Cuba, particularly in rural areas. The State gave artists a fixed income, equal to that of other trades, and covered their material costs, exempting art from the process of commercial exchange. A new system of arts education was created, both to develop professional artists, through the establishment of National Art schools, and to make art available to '*aficionados*' [amateurs] through the training of instructors active in local communities. Under these new conditions, art flourished, engendering an art for all and an understanding that creative production and creativity were "*fundamental to the development of individual and social consciousness; that 'culture' ought not to be the preserve of a metropolitan elite*" [*FREE CULTURE!* interpretation].

Barr's work '*FREE CULTURE!*' operates at a number of levels, relating to both the site of the RSA and current debates around cultural policies, including art education. The pillars of the RSA, between which the banners are strung, essentially become bars to the public, given that there is an admission price of £4/£2. Furthermore, as Barr states in his literature, whilst emerging artists are afforded a public platform and the opportunity of twenty awards, the institution does not cover the sixty participating artists' fees or materials. This work is also set in a national context, against the backdrop of much debate about securing artists' payment in publicly-funded galleries, through campaigns such as '*Paying Artists: Valuing Art, Valuing Artists*'. At a primary level, art is getting squeezed from schools' curriculums in favour of STEM subjects. In 2011, legislation was passed allowing Scottish universities to set tuition fees of up to £9,000 per annum from 2012 onwards, for students from other parts of the UK, causing concern that the diversity of the student population would shift to

predominantly middle and upper class. By charging in this way for education, the student is in danger of becoming the customer or consumer, their cultural production purely a commodity.

'FREE CULTURE!' continues to build on Barr's questioning of institutions, systems and conditions. For his degree show at The Glasgow School of Art in 2015, he chose a small discreet area by the door as a place he used only for rest. He spent the rest of his time located outside the show, in the city, dressed as a one-man band. At the degree show – which represents the culmination of four years of study and where success is often charted by sales or being spotted by galleries and curators – Barr operated a strategy that had some degree of risk, going against the norm in which large exhibiting spaces are preferred in order to exhibit the fruits of labour. With *'FREE CULTURE!'* he continues to operate at this threshold, finding a further effective way to critique current UK and Scottish cultural policy and its relationship to market, artist, art production and wider society, by considering the ideologies of arts and the Cuban Revolution in relation to a culture for all. [881]

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