

# Art Criticism and the Glasgow Miracle by Susannah Thompson

In terms of establishing an identity for contemporary art in Scotland over the last twenty-five years, art criticism and related forms of writing on visual art have played a much more nuanced role than major exhibitions, prizes and awards such as the Turner Prize, Becks Futures, the British Art Show and the Venice Biennale. It is these major events which have seemed to define those artists who collectively represent the much mythologised ‘Glasgow Miracle’. Similarly, unlike the career-defining roles played by artist-run spaces and curatorial initiatives, writing, where it has been considered at all, has frequently been relegated to the status of bit part or occasional player in terms of its contribution to the success of Glasgow-based artists in the 1990s.

In fact, writing published in Scotland about Scottish art and (to a lesser extent) writing produced elsewhere on Scottish art has long been a topic for much moaning and wringing of hands, sometimes rightly so. In many respects this anxiety reflects wider concerns over the role and status of art criticism generally, but in Scotland, together with debate over the mode, role, quality and ‘criticality’ of criticism, an added and longstanding concern has been the absence of platforms and publications through which critical voices could be heard. As a result, there has been a perception that art criticism in Scotland has either not been produced or that where it has, it has existed in only the lightest, most diluted forms and has thus been unworthy of any serious attention.

Some of these concerns are undoubtedly valid, and continue to be so, but both today and over the last four decades, the situation is more complex than it might initially appear to be. In fact, the view that critical writing, or indeed any form of writing on Scottish art – including experimental and innovative forms of artwriting – has been absent or lacking is reductive and over-simplified. Though the quantity of writing may never have been large (and why should it be, for a relatively small country?) there has been no dearth of engaging, meaningful and critical writing on Scottish art – if one knew what to look for and where to look for it.

In 2007 the art historian Paul Stirton wrote that ‘the historiography of modern art in Scotland should not be difficult to write – mainly because there are not many books on the subject’.[i] However, rather than appearing in major monographs, in books on the history of Scottish art or in academic journals, the vast majority of art writing and criticism in Scotland in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century has been published samizdat-style, often in self-published, DIY or short-lived and ephemeral fanzines and magazines. Likewise, exhibition catalogue essays and gallery free-sheets (thanks to the enlightened directorship of figures such as Chris Carrell at the Third Eye Centre, who recognised the gap) have acted as another key space for writing on contemporary Scottish art, perhaps taking on a greater significance in Scotland than in larger countries with broader (and better funded) networks of art magazines, newspapers and journals.

A particular feature of art criticism and writing in Scotland is that many of the most incisive, erudite and critical writers on art have been practicing artists, rather than ‘professional’ critics or commentators. In relation to this, given the longstanding and continued complaints about the absence of writing on art in Scotland, it is interesting that the number of both artist-critics, former artists who have become critics and artists who have chosen to engage in other, related forms writing on or about art in Scotland has steadily

increased since the late 1980s, and continues to do so. So what is the relationship between Scottish art and writing on Scottish art? Why have so many artists participated in art writing and criticism? And what might the links be between recent critical writing on art in Scotland and the phenomenon of that much contested and fractious term ‘the Glasgow Miracle’?

One of the dominant narratives of late 20<sup>th</sup> century art in Scotland has been that of the self-determined artist, working alongside like-minded peers to establish and organise exhibition spaces, initiatives and projects which have worked to circumvent more traditional or conventional structures of power and authority in the art world. As I have suggested, whilst the histories of certain projects, artist-run spaces and exhibitions are referenced almost *ad infinitum* in popular accounts of Glasgow’s rise to power, the role of writing and criticism in this drive for agency and self-empowerment has often been overlooked. In part, this is probably due to the difficulty in identifying and collating the various texts and publications which might form a cohesive history of activity in this field. In some cases, the most significant examples of writing and criticism have been published in magazines and journals which have not been exclusively dedicated to visual art (such as *Scottish International* or the *Edinburgh Review*) thus making the task of tracing the history of art criticism and writing on visual art even more difficult. The fact that much writing activity has been produced by visual artists might further account for the disparate and eclectic nature of some of the most interesting texts and the complexity of locating them. Brought together, such writing might constitute a ‘body’ of work but the individual texts have (sometimes consciously on the part of artist-writers) been produced outside academic or institutional frameworks, and have therefore largely escaped the categorising, archiving and taxonomic tendencies to which such institutions often adhere (though this is slowly changing through projects such as *The Glasgow Miracle* and *Glasgow School of Art*’s commitment to the collections of figures such as Cordelia Oliver, who was one of Scotland’s most enduring and prolific critics).

It would be problematic, even inaccurate, to attribute the success and recognition of Scottish artists in the last few decades to the production of artists’ writings and it is important not to overstate the role of writing in recent histories of Scottish art yet it is also important to acknowledge that writing and criticism have formed at least part of the picture. In a Scottish context, some of the artists associated with the success of 1990s art – and many before and after them – have recognised the role writing, especially writing by artists themselves, can and has played in helping to establish an identity for groups of artists. Artists’ writings have worked to critically frame new shifts and directions in art and have often attempted to contest the need for critical validation and articulation ‘from the outside’. In an essay written in 1999, the artist (and writer on art) Ross Sinclair cogently summarised this position, asking, ‘...how does writing and publishing material about artists [...] contribute to the historicisation and 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?’

Sinclair goes on to highlight, albeit implicitly, why writing (and, of course, through art itself and associated activities such as curating) should have become so important to himself and his peers as a way to gain agency and control over their own representation and promotion as a group or generation: ‘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’. [ii]

Sinclair himself is a notable example of this drive for self-determination, producing numerous essays, articles and reviews throughout his career, including catalogue essays for the major artist-initiated exhibition *Windfall* ’91 and 1992’s *New Art in Scotland*, both held in Glasgow. Both essays acted as a

statement of intent, almost a manifesto for young graduates of the recently established Department of Environmental Art at Glasgow School of Art, and the texts can be read as Sinclair's attempt, representing himself and his cohort, to distance themselves from the previous generation of Scottish artists (New Image Painting in particular). The essays heralded a directional shift or change in the type of work produced in Scotland, sometimes described as Scottish neo-conceptualism, and asserted the artists' intent to produce, display and critically frame work on their own terms rather than waiting passively 'to be discovered'. Alongside many other events, projects and initiatives, and writing by friends and associates including Douglas Gordon, Craig Richardson and Roderick Buchanan, Sinclair's writing activities helped to establish a critical mass for artists in 1990s Glasgow.

Similar self-representation through writing appeared in the pages of *Variant* (edited by Malcolm Dickson and others in its first incarnation between the late 1980s and early 90s), *Variant Vol. 2* (edited by Leigh French and others from 1996 onwards), in catalogue essays and gallery texts produced by organisations such as Transmission, Collective, CCA and Tramway and in international magazines and journals including Thomas Lawson's *Real Life* magazine and the newly established art magazine *Frieze*. Malcolm Dickson in particular was a key figure in encouraging artists to write and, through editing and commissioning for *Variant*, provided a space for their voices to be heard following his own engagement with writing, curating and criticism in the 1980s. Leigh French continued to foster artists writing in *Variant* (Vol.2), through which many artist-writers, many associated with the MFA programme at Glasgow School of Art, began to write alongside their visual art practice. Alongside French himself, these artist-writers included John Beagles, Graham Ramsay and Ross Birrell.[iii]

As I have indicated, many artists associated with the 'Scotia Nostra' (Douglas Gordon's tongue-in-cheek name for his peer group) frequently wrote about their own work and the work of their collaborators and associates (some of the early reviews and features in *Frieze* are a case in point here) with friends and former classmates reviewing one another's work or acting as ambassadors for the group as a whole. Along with their more politicised intentions to create a culture without mediation and one, based in Glasgow, which refused to accept the projected, metropolitan views of how Scottish art should be defined in the 1990s, these artists were nevertheless clearly aware of the potential writing offered to garner further media attention for their visual art work, both in Scotland and beyond. Charles Harrison has observed that 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', so even when Gordon, Richardson, Sinclair and others wrote about the work of others, they were simultaneously creating a profile for themselves as artists.[iv] Thus, in writing for contemporary art magazines and catalogues which focussed on the work of their peers, by implicit extension, Glasgow-based artists were provided with ideal opportunities for the exposure, promotion and visibility of their own work.

The reliance on established networks and social capital in terms of writing, commissioning and publishing has been held by some as evidence of the lack of critical distance in Scottish art writing or as in some way mitigating against evaluative, oppositional or contestative forms of criticism. This may be the case, but what is also certain is that one of the undoubted strengths of this partly 'closed' system of writing and commissioning lies in the writers' and critics' nuanced understanding the very specific conditions of production and reception – linked to particular art historical, educational, socio-political and economic contexts – which have characterised certain periods of art in Scotland. In a relatively small, intimate art world, it is rare – perhaps impossible – for those based in Scotland to be anything other than a 'participant observer', directly engaged in the networks they discuss. Even by virtue of their involvement in the field of criticism, these artists' writings could be seen as a political statement or position regarding the role of the artist in society. Discussing Robert Morris's writings, 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'. The same point was made by Morris himself in his claim that he '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'.[v]

In Scotland, Malcolm Dickson made a similar case for Scottish artists' engagement with both writing and curating. Dickson noted that he and his peers were attempting to create a culture without mediation: 'We were trying to eliminate a 'secondariness' in the production, exhibition and writing of art'.[vi] In other words, rather than being spoken for, Dickson, Sinclair and many other artist-writers were determined to speak for themselves and create some kind of critical autonomy.

In a letter to Art Monthly in 2004, the artist and critic Peter Suchin made a similar point, tracing the emergence of self-conscious attempts to enter the critical and theoretical arena on the part of artists: '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.'[vii]

In line with Suchin's observation, writing and publishing by artists in Scotland had already begun to grow well before the period considered here and though activity and interest in writing by artists expanded during the 1990s, it does not represent the model of the artist-writer in Scotland. From the 1950s to the 1980s and beyond Edward Gage, Cordelia Oliver, Alasdair Gray, Alexander Moffat, Robert Crozier, Ken Currie, Malcolm Dickson and many others contributed to discourse around art in Scotland, demonstrating the desire of visual artists to represent themselves and their peers, to think and theorise without mediation across platforms as varied as broadsheet journalism, self-published free-sheets, academic journals, catalogues and pamphlets.

It is also important to recognise the contribution of non-artists to the development of art writing and criticism in Scotland. In the context of the decade most clearly associated with the 'Glasgow Miracle' other figures very closely connected to the production and reception of art in Scotland (often through friendship, family or an art school education) proved to be valuable supporters and champions of Scottish art through writing and criticism.

In common with writing by artists in the same period, many of the writers, curators and educators who participated in art writing and criticism on or around contemporary art in Scotland from the mid-1980s onwards demonstrated that alternatives to conventional and traditional modes of art criticism could act as valuable, valid and significant points of entry to the visual art to which their texts responded, sometimes in an apparently oblique or tangential manner. This tendency was particularly apparent in the creative and 'post-critical' catalogue essays and exhibition-related texts published in the 1990s and early 2000s (and up to the present, in some cases) by figures such as John Calcutt, Neil Mulholland, Will Bradley and Francis McKee for organisations such as Transmission, Tramway, CCA, Collective and others. Along with the artists already discussed, many of these writers opened up the form and style of writing on art, presenting different or alternative modes of engagement with their 'subject matter'. Exhibition catalogue essays (to take one example) were often produced by these writers through a close working relationship or collaboration with artists. The resulting texts – sometimes at the specific request of the artist – variously responded to, reflected or paralleled visual art works without recourse to the overtly or explicitly elucidatory or interpretative expected of such forms of writing. Nevertheless, whilst such figures were crucial, sometimes instrumental supporters of artists in the 1990s and early 2000s, there is something

especially interesting about the texts produced by artists themselves. As Charles Harrison has noted, ‘we place a particular value on information from the horse’s mouth [...] writings by the actual producers themselves will always be *sine qua non*’.[viii]

The legacy of artists’ direct, participatory involvement in writing in the 1980s and 1990s in particular has been generative. For many contemporary artists in Scotland today, writing – be it creative, critical, ‘as’, ‘around’ or ‘about’ practice – has long been part of an ever-expanding definition of what pluralist, post-studio practices might encompass. Fanzines, journals, artwriting, theoretical writing, criticism, statements, blogs, catalogue essays and reviews are not seen as an adjunct to practice, but simply one part of a synthesised critical endeavour.

[i] 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.

[ii] 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*, 12-17 October, Alberta, Canada: University of Alberta.

[iii] It is worth noting that the artists’ writings which defined this period are almost exclusively male, as they had been in the 1970s and 80s. Whilst there was a surge of new artwriting – especially creative and experimental forms of writing – by women artists in the very late 1990s and 2000s (such as Sarah Tripp, Fiona Jardine, Lucy McKenzie, Cathy Wilkes and others) with only a few exceptions (mainly older artists such as Sam Ainsley or Cordelia Oliver), writing by artists was dominated by men. Writing on contemporary Scottish art by women tended to be produced by art historians, curators or journalists rather than artists and their contribution was often prolific (I refer here to figures such as Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, Elizabeth Mahoney, Clare Henry, Moira Jeffrey, Alice Bain, Nicola White, Roberta McGrath and Judith Findlay).

[iv] Harrison, C. (2001) ‘The Trouble with Writing’, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language*, London: The MIT Press.

[v] 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>

[vi] Dickson, M (2002) Interview with the author, 27 May.

[vii] Suchin, P. (2004) ‘Uncritical Curating’, *Art Monthly*, June, Issue 277.

[viii] Harrison, C. (2001) ‘The Trouble with Writing’, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language*, London: The MIT Press.