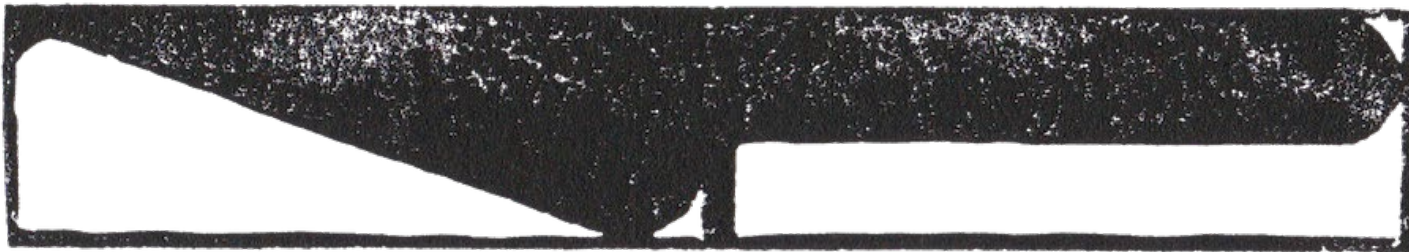


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## LEAVING THE AULD TOON

Neil Clements

A prominent feature of Glasgow's 1911 International Festival was the 'Auld Toon', a replica of a city quarter as it would have appeared in the Jacobean era. There, spectators were offered an opportunity to vicariously encounter life in a pre-industrialised Glasgow, set in an architectural vernacular that had been all but erased by the urbanising projects of the 19th century. The buildings that made up this settlement were not constructed in their original materials, but in wood, plaster and fabric, ingeniously painted to resemble the originals.<sup>1</sup> These ghostly facsimiles served as a theatrical setting in which a form of bygone civic life was acted out for the benefit of visitors.

As with all expositions of this sort, the perceived audience for the 1911 festival was twofold. It was intended by its organisers to communicate to the world at large the power Glasgow held as an industrial manufacturer. The approval of Royal visits and foreign delegations were highly sought after by the city's burghers and formed a large portion of whether the event was deemed a success. However, despite such global pretensions, the bulk of footfall to such festivals was drawn from the local population. To these throngs of Glaswegians, the festival was part education, part entertainment. Attractions were designed accordingly, intended to inculcate in local audiences an authorised message about their own civic identity.

Although dramatically diminished in terms of scale and the amount of financial support it receives, the contemporary Glasgow International Art Festival arguably operates on many of the same principles as its Victorian namesake; seeking to address both local and international interests while looking to frame the city as somewhere that is at once culturally productive and outward-looking. It is worth considering the way in which Glasgow International has exerted a determining influence on the image of the city held by local practitioners. Here, one might point to the refined sensibility that marked Katrina Brown's programmes in 2010 and 2012, the sense of up-to-dateness that typified Sarah McCrory's curatorial selections, or the more egalitarian attitude adopted by Richard Parry, the festival's current director, as cues to this composite image. These have, year on year, assumed a greater degree of institutional coherence when compared with the inaugural 2005 festival, organised under the auspices of Francis McKee.<sup>2</sup> Through both its curated and accompanying programmes, each iteration of GI has articulated its own

worldview, and presented a model of what the city is capable of becoming, by providing a guide to the kinds of artistic activity considered germane to its institutions at that moment.





T & R Annan & Sons, *The Old Scottish Street (Looking East)*, 1911, photogravure, 18 x 23 cm. Souvenir Album of the Scottish Exhibition of National History, Art and Industry, Glasgow.

What such an analysis of curatorial intention overlooks is significant changes to the backdrop against which GI has taken place. The dwindling number of regularly funded venues exhibiting contemporary art, and a steadily declining number of exhibitions in those venues per year, has led to the festival occupying an increasing centrality in the city's calendar. There is also an argument to be made that the concentrated hive of activity offered by GI acts to de-incentivise international visits at times outwith the festival. The kind of cultural spectacle which might have been distributed more evenly across an annual calendar is now reserved for this narrow window of time. Such an issue extends beyond the curatorial principles driving any single festival. It highlights the extent to which the festival format has been embraced by different groups, and the various ends to which these groups would have it serve.

The biennial festival serves to regulate the kinds of contact local artists have with international visitors to Glasgow. Anecdotally, a London-based curator, responding to a question in the summer of 2018 about when they next planned on visiting the city, told me that they were planning on attending the 2020 festival. At the time this was just under two years away. While this might not necessarily be representative of the curatorial community as a whole, I still found the answer disquieting. On one hand it speaks of the festival's evident ability to mobilise professional attention; while on the other it sends a clear message as to when it will fall on the city, and the narrowing channels through which this will take place. Rather than being somewhere individuals travel to speculatively, GI ensures the city instead takes its place amongst a scheduled sequence of global events that structure the curatorial calendar. It does so as part of an infernal bargain on the part of cultural organisers, as it is assumed better to form part of this calendar than to not.

In previous iterations of the festival the number of exhibitions on show, both within and outside the listed programme, has meant that all but the most voracious visitor is unlikely to engage with anything near the whole range of attractions on offer. Professional visitors' itineraries are for the most part limited to a tour of the director's programme and the city's central institutions and commercial spaces. Taking this into consideration, the benefit of mounting peripheral exhibitions to attract the attention of influential visitors is questionable. A more likely audience is the multi-generational assemblage of individuals who make up the local scene, and who can spend a fortnight or more taking the programme in.

If peripheral activity of this kind is more likely to reach a local audience, what is the purpose of prioritising a single month on a biennial basis to do so? As anyone who has been involved will know, the lead up to GI involves a panicked stampede for available real estate to accommodate these displays. The strain placed on the city's few professional fabricators and lenders of technical equipment is not inconsiderable either. Complaints from participants that they have been unable to see anything on or adjacent to the festival programme, having been so preoccupied with their own preparations, are as ubiquitous as they are tedious.

The festival format reinforces a story about the city being an exceptional place to live and make work. Underpinning the image of Glasgow as an artistic hub is a narrative of organisational self-sufficiency, one whose origins lie in the artist-led activities of the 1980s and 1990s. Its key milestones are enshrined in Sarah Lowndes' *Social Sculpture*, first published in 2003, and re-issued with an additional chapter in 2010.<sup>3</sup> Lowndes' survey of the Glasgow scene lays out a series of core tenets that continue to shape its identity. This is a story of improvised, non-conventional gallery spaces, artist-led activity, and international dialogue fostered at a grassroots level. Its seductive appeal is unmistakable when compared with the other more conservative histories of Scottish art available. Lowndes' account has come to represent an official history for those looking to package Glasgow art for international consumption. This packaged identity presumes a structural continuity between the conditions under which artistic activity took place twenty or more years ago, and the conditions under which it takes place today.

There are a range of factors that should temper such presumptions. A dramatic increase to non-Scottish UK Higher Education fees beginning in 2006, and additional alterations in 2010 have added to the financial burden of many young graduates, while steadily climbing rental and property prices pose real challenges to the economic maintenance of an artistic practice. The 2010 replacement of the Scottish Arts Council by Creative Scotland has brought about significant shifts in how cultural subsidy is sought and awarded to both individuals and smaller organisations.<sup>4</sup> Glasgow City Council's delegation of its real estate portfolio to City Property Glasgow the same year, a LLP that in turn employs the commercial property agents like Ryden and Graham and Sibbald to manage many of its holdings, has meant artists' access to vacant spaces has changed in equal measure.<sup>5</sup> These are only some of the factors that those looking to perpetuate a narrative of Glaswegian self-sufficiency would prefer to ignore.

Signs of this can be found in the paucity of exhibitions that take place when compared with previous decades.<sup>6</sup> It is not unusual either for organisations to schedule their first exhibition of a Glasgow International year to coincide with the festival opening. These observations can to an extent be countered by acknowledging the larger number of screening events and performances now hosted by these spaces in lieu of static exhibitions. In many ways this is representative of a changing focus on the part of younger artists towards these formats, though this shift could itself be at least partly symptomatic of financial pressures that preclude access to studio space and more material-based practices. This cannot in any case disguise the reality that, at a time when art schools are producing more prospective exhibitors than ever before, and Glasgow has become an attractive destination for many creative practitioners dissatisfied with their working lives in London and elsewhere, there is a scarcity of local opportunities for these individuals to receive institutional validation for their efforts.

What I am really asking is who is best served by the current arrangements? There is a good chance that by accommodating this centralisation of activity, however reluctantly, something is being lost. Glasgow's visual artists are in danger of reducing to short periods of time, largely for the edification of visitors rather than ourselves, a space of engagement that was once continuously operational. And, by allowing our cultural capital to be channelled in this way, the city risks becoming less somewhere to live and work, and more like a folk village in which a hidebound re-enactment of previous freedoms periodically takes place. We are, in this sense, constructing our own 'Auld Toon'. This is a space in which grassroots autonomy becomes little more than an authorised façade. Or, in words used to describe the original 1911 attraction, 'a charming sham'.<sup>7</sup>

A vaunted capacity for self-organisation is a cultural brand that the Glasgow City Council, those in charge of the

city's cultural organisation, and its practicing artists each present to the world at large. This brand purports to consider proximity to financial capital a corroding influence and celebrates a DIY attitude to cultural production. This has had both positive and negative effects. It is a formula that suggests an admirable degree of endurance and adaptability. However, the fact that activity will occur in spite of whether or not it is supported is no doubt comforting to those responsible for funding visual art in the city. It allows such interests to ignore the impact their negligence is producing, while at the same time laying claim to any cultural product that emerges in spite of it.

There is little to suggest that things will change any time soon. If anything, it is only likely to become more pronounced in coming years. It is currently unknown what effect the Covid-19 pandemic will have, beyond the postponement of the 2020 GI festival, but it is likely to lead to a greater degree of isolationism more generally. Emerging discussions around curatorial sustainability, examining the environmental consequences of international shipping and travel, may offer institutions a moral rationalisation for their austere programming.

If the city is to function in service of its local practitioners, we must pay closer attention to its internal rhythms. These are represented by the patterns by which cultural events are distributed and rendered visible to a wider audience. It may well be that the only way to perpetuate a grassroots scene is by parting with the very myth upon which it is founded. This has less to do with questioning the validity of previous histories than acknowledging the lack of any successful attempt to extend or expand upon them. A list of the noteworthy organisations, collectives and projects that have been established in the last decade would now run to the dozens, if not more.<sup>8</sup> It is a patchwork infrastructure such as this that we may have to fall back on if the artistic health of the city is to be preserved. The city's continued attractiveness to an international audience is probably just as reliant upon the mystique this infrastructure presents to outsiders. The difficulty will lie in developing strategies that allow a collective image of ourselves to be formed and preserved, while resisting attempts to co-opt it as an official narrative.

#### NOTES

1. Perilla and Juliet Kinchin, *Glasgow's Great Exhibitions* (Bicester: White Cockade, 1989), p. 103. ↩
2. It is worth noting that the inaugural festival was itself an expansion of the Real Art Week, a cultural programme organised by UZ Events that accompanied the Glasgow Art Fair. ↩
3. Sarah Lowndes, *Social Sculpture: Art, Performance and Music in Glasgow – A Social History of Independent Practice, Exhibitions and Events Since 1971* (Glasgow: STOPSTOP Publications, 2003); *Social Sculpture: The Rise of the Glasgow Art Scene* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2010). ↩
4. See Dan Brown, Deborah Jackson and Neil Mulholland, 'Artists Running: Fifty Years of Scottish Cultural Devolution,' *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol.19, no.2 (2018), pp. 139–167; David Stevenson, 'Tartan and Tantrums: Critical Reflections on the Creative Scotland "Stooshie",' *Cultural Trends*, Vol.23, No.3 (2014), pp. 178–187. ↩
5. For more information on Glasgow City Council's use of ALEOs (Arms-Length External Organisations) see Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, 'Glasgow Life or Death?', *Variant*, No.41, Spring 2011, pp. 15–20. ↩
6. While not statistically sound by any means, a comparison of exhibitions by several of the city's artist-run initiatives in 2005 – the year GI is initiated – and 2018 – the last iteration of the festival – provides a compelling, if partial mode of comparison. Transmission Gallery held eleven exhibitions in 2005, and just two in 2018; Glasgow Project Room held eleven exhibitions in 2005 and five in 2018; Market Gallery held eight exhibitions in 2005 and two in 2018. Overall the pattern would seem to indicate a widespread shift towards a model of programming favoured by Regularly Funded Organisations such as The Common Guild in Glasgow, and the Fruitmarket in Edinburgh, who each schedule around three exhibitions per year. ↩

7. Kinchin and Kinchin, p. 103. ↩
8. An incomplete list of spaces and artist led organisations formed from 2010 onwards would include The Albatross, A Library of Olfactive Material, A-M-G-5, Art in Public, Cabbage, Caledonia Rd. Church, Celine, Chapter Thirteen, Civic House, Civic Room, Collective Text, Crownpoint Studios, The Glue Factory, Frutta Gallery, GmbH, Hotel Gilchrist, Good Press, G.O.D.S, Govan Project Space, Grey Wolf Studios, Gwennan International, Glasgow Open House Festival, GY Open-House Festival, The Hidden Noise, Jo Brand Gallery, Komplex Gallery, Laurieston Arches, LoomLoomLoom, Love Unlimited, Lunchtime, Lux Scotland, Mother Tongue Curating, Mount Florida Screenings, Mount Florida Studios, New City Space, New Glasgow Society, O-II-IO, The Old Hairdressers, Patricia Fleming Projects, Panel, Pavilion Pavilion, The Pipe Factory, PLANT, Platform, The Poetry Club, Poster Club, Psychick Dancehall, Publication Studio at CCA, Queens Park Railway Club, Radclyffe Hall, Rez de Chaussée, Saltmarket Co-op, Sculpture Placement Group, Slaghammers, Studio Pavillion at House for an Art Lover, Telfer Gallery, tenletters, Tiki Bar, Torrisdale Street Studios, Voidoid Archive, Washington Street Studios, Where People Sleep, 1 Royal Terrace, 16 Nicholson St, and 42 Carlton Place. To this one could add a number of other, slightly older projects that have not featured in existing surveys, such as The Chalet, David Dale Gallery & Studios, EmergeD, It's Our Playground, One Ton Prop, Open Eye Club, The Now Museum, Ten Til Ten and 85A. ↩

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