

Notes for Richard Demarco Workshop Series

Workshop 2:

How can ownership of an archive of international art be distributed and shared against the re-emergence of nationalism?

Monday 6 February

12.30-16.30

Edinburgh College of Art and online

12.50 - 13.30 Panel Discussion

Roddy Hunter, Lois Keidan and Alastair MacLennan, chaired by Mark Waugh

Question:

How can *ownership of an archive of international art be distributed and shared against the re-emergence of nationalism?*

Thank you for the invitation. It's a great pleasure and privilege to be invited to take part in the conversation, and I also want to put on record my personal gratitude to Richard for his work, given the fundamental importance and influence of artists such as Kantor, Beuys, Abramovic and others on my formation as an artist and teacher coming into the world of art in the late 1980s in Glasgow.

From a time of invigorating artistic and cultural exchange between east and west Europe, I had a similarly internationalist instinct, and since travelling and performing in Transylvania in 1994, I subsequently spent much time in Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Lithuania, Poland and in Czech Republic, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Serbia and former East Germany. Many people know of my Hungarian family connections through my wife and artistic partner, Judit Bodor, who is also here today.

So, although we were born 40 years apart, Richard, you and I have much in common as Scots artists with a cross-European outlook. It's so helpful for me to reflect upon my formation as an artist and teacher through this cross-cultural arc of dialogue and exchange. So, thank you, Ricky; this work undoubtedly made me.

Several assumptions and questions underpin the question we are discussing today, particularly around notions of *ownership, archive, international art, the re-emergence of nationalism*, particularly of course in the context of contemporary Scotland. During our conversation, I imagine and hope these assumptions will be tested out and unpacked, where that's useful.

From my experience, one or two things immediately came to mind when I saw the question. It's funny when I look back all those years ago at Rootless '97 in Hull when I put together a panel discussion on a project called ATLAS (Archive for Transnational Living Art Studies) that I was trying to get off the ground with Artpool, Black Kit, Performance Index, Live Art Archive and Inter/Le Lieu - who would have thought, weirdly and worriedly, some of those ideas might still be relevant today?

I also did a performed reading/talk at the HTBA reunion for the City of Culture called 'Mobility and its discontents: nomadic thinking on motion, migrancy, sedenterisation and culture' in response to the question '*With Brexit and City of Culture as a backdrop, what does a sense of European nomadism do to inform cultural practice and policy in Hull?*'. I guess the reference to 'nationalism' in the question for this panel might be more about 'populism', maybe, remembering, as I know you're very aware, 'nationalism;' means something different in the Scottish context.

I've had a few thoughts and observations specifically on the legacy of the Demarco archive too, which I hope might help today's conversation:

In the last workshop, I offered the provocation that the Demarco archive could not be considered at risk, at least relative to other archives. This principally has to do with the acknowledged art historical importance of figures such as Beuys, particularly Richard's ceaseless advocacy and passion for the legacy of the archive and, more importantly, the preservation of the period of European culture it documents. Understandably Ricky is rightly concerned about what happens when he is no longer here, which we all hope won't for be some time yet, to perform that role of advocate and curator.

Still digging deeper into the idea that the archive is marginalised, its value underappreciated or at worst ignored, suggests that there is an inherent, inalienable value to the work in the archive which ought to be 'taken seriously' from Ricky's perspective and play a part in the education of artists today.

What does it mean to art students here at ECA that Strategy Get Arts was held in this very building 50 years ago? What are the direct and indirect influences of these events and their education today? The obvious observation is that so much has changed no less in the past decade alone that notions of inalienable, universal value has been radically challenged.

Isn't the irony, of course, that the avant-garde desire that courses through the archive similarly sought to question and destabilise the existing social, cultural and

even political order, particularly in relation to the critique of state socialist society in the east and social mores of the west? I hope today to make a critical contribution to the debate around the archive's future in service of this avant-garde instinct, as to do otherwise is a disservice to this legacy.

The archive embodies the cross-cultural exchange between Scotland and east central and south-eastern Europe avant-garde in the critical moment of the post-war context of the mid-late twentieth century. Much of this is premised around notions of art as freedom of expression in the context of how we understand state socialism as authoritarian and repressive.

How do we understand the relevance of these ideas, particularly the avant-garde and the associated idea of the heroic, charismatic, radical, genius, often male artist? Moreover, what do we think now about the contemporary impact of nationalism in light of the dissolution of the Soviet Union? There is also an undercurrent of European religion, particularly Catholicism, coursing through these artists' work, connected to understanding the 'mystery' of art and creation since the Renaissance. What when international extends beyond the European culture of Christendom? And how do we relate our understanding of Scotland today with the romanticisation of the landscape, the land of Macbeth, that 'Celtic world' that so enchanted Beuys – do we recognise 'that Scotland' today?

I said that I didn't feel the archive was at risk due to its undisputed art historical value, but its material preservation is still to be assured. It seems central to safeguarding its material preservation is an acknowledgement of its *national value* and indisputable relevance to understanding Scotland's arts and culture story, particularly in terms of the visual arts. Incidentally, the notion that its value lies in that 'someone in Scotland' made this work here rather than in England, particularly London, that artists such as Beuys, Kantor and Abramovic worked in Scotland before England isn't enough. Why wouldn't that happen? The solution to ownership of the archive doesn't lie in a horizontal network of care but rather in the assurance of protection from a national institution. Again, somewhat ironically, the exploration of the national question in Scotland might provide the solution to how the legacy of the archive is secured.

Roddy Hunter
6 February 2023