

# Editorial

Welcome to volume two of Variant, marking the re-launch of the magazine after a lengthy absence. It must be something of a rarity for a magazine which was 'killed off' to get the opportunity to discuss its demise; just like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn we have turned up at our own funeral.

Firstly we would like to thank all the many readers who wrote to the Scottish Arts Council in protest against their decision. We have tried to summarise the numerous issues brought up in some of the responses in the form of a letters page, which has the additional function of providing a link with the past and orienting our readership with the focus of the magazine. It will suffice to say here that none of the carefully reasoned arguments put forward met with anything like an appropriate response.

We have resurfaced at a crucial yet not altogether unfamiliar point, which in the interim period of our absence has witnessed this tendency to openly and routinely consign independent and critical voices to silence, developed into something approaching policy. From who's viewpoint will the history of the last two years in the arts in Scotland be constructed, will it be from diverse sources? Just as Variant's critical function had been defined as an urgent and diagnostic one, offered from a position of autonomy from vested interests (rather than operating as PR for the institutional art machine) it was targeted for closure. Was it really such an irony? It is our aim to carry forward Variant as a project with or without funding. As stated in the last editorial: "For the establishment of a critical, engaging and diverse culture, lateral links need to be made across media, and opinions need to be expressed and exposed."

Is it unreasonable to assume that, earlier than in any other industrial country, British governments began to make the avoidance of crises their first priority? That even before the era of full suffrage they had discovered how to exercise the arts of public management; extending the states power to assess, educate, bargain with, appease or constrain the demands of the electorate? That they created in Britain a political Gleichschaltung, and a financial Anstalt, subtle and loose enough to be resented only by 'deviants' and 'minorities'; and in which the challenges of Conservatism and Socialism were alike dispersed in a common reformist policy justified by an unreal assessment of historical tradition?

With comparatively limited resources we can sustain a much needed forum for debate based in Glasgow, which can move through the forces exerted by the administration of the arts in Scotland. It is our perception that the current climate seeks to stifle any deviation from the cultural packaging and re-packaging of a benign culture of entertainment. This imagined utopia, this "Disneyland without the rides," is a product of the repressive prioritisation of public funds which has become social Darwinism run wild. It is our intention to challenge this emerging culture of denial and its attendant language of competition, through debate and critical analysis.

In this, the re-launch issue, we have taken the decision not to put a specific type of exhibition review to the forefront, but rather take the opportunity to focus on more critical/theoretical issues. Our initial plan is to produce four magazines in the space of a year, each one expanding the possibilities of what Variant has previously achieved. Variant has always been part of, and aimed to represent ideas that are refused the hospitality of the would be 'mainstream,' which itself represents and replicates the ideological chastity of a tiny elite. With the new format comes a wider distribution (possibly the highest of any comparable magazine in the UK) and a wider readership; also the magazine is free!

"**Sycophancy:** Gr. *sykophantes*, usually said to mean one who informed against persons exporting figs from Attica or plundering the sacred fig trees; but more probably one who made rich men yield up their fruit (*lit.* to show a fig)."

# The Beast that Would Not Die

THIS IS A collection of some of the responses sent to the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) by our readership, provoked by the withdrawal of Variant's funding which resulted in its closure. They are arranged here to represent a glimpse of the concerted effort in lobbying which was independently undertaken by a wide range of individuals and groups. In this case their efforts were ignored. The immediate question which arises from this (and other similar cases), would have to ask whether the SAC are in any way responsive to the opinion of the art community: given that they have openly defined themselves as not a 'democracy,' does this then mean that they are autocratic? What form should our approaches to them take—sycophancy?

This is something of an unusual—in that such a gathering would never normally have such exposure—but ever present and powerful combination of viewpoints. They have been edited down to focus on each individual's attempts to identify very real, yet unaddressed concerns. Although their concentration centred on Variant's plight, the predicament revealed still resonates strongly with the present climate. They have also been presented to provide a tentative model of what kind of concerted effort could be made, in the pages of this magazine to monitor and cast light on the activities of funding bodies in determining our culture.

"Responding to letters of support for Variant, from prominent critics and artists, SAC officers stated that it was not considered vital to the infrastructure of Scottish art."

**Creative Camera**

"Variant has survived resolutely for many years now in conditions which have left many arts organisations in a state of financial ruin—organisations that have subsequently been kept afloat by means of additional Arts Council funding. To pull the rug from under the feet of Variant at this stage is a truly short-sighted act of cultural vandalism..."

**Transmission Committee**

"In order to produce four issues in the forthcoming year, Variant required a substantial increase in its grant. After much discussion and consideration of the magazine's value, the Committee decided, in relation to other priorities, not to recommend this increase. Without an increase a continuation of the current grant of £21,000 would only have guaranteed two issues. The Committee decided that it could not justify continued funding on that basis..."

**Andrew Nairne in reply to the above**

"I cannot support this decision. You may have other ideas about publications from Scotland, but with Alba gone and now Variant it does seem perverse."

**David Harding—Environmental Art GSA**

"There will now be no focus for the debate and interchange of ideas that has been of such importance to Scotland's growing development as a significant cultural centre outside of London."

**Entire MA student body GSA**

"While all the various bodies with Scottish Arts Council support are of relative importance in helping artists to gain access to showing their work in public, it seems to me that there must also be a platform for consistent and considered critical debate on the general state of the arts. Any art scene worth its name would expect not one but a number of regular publications working to fulfil this very necessary function. That Scotland is lacking or being denied this essential critical facility must be a sad reflection on how seriously we take the intellectual and ethical role of art in Scottish society."

**Bill Hare, Talbot Rice Gallery**

"The fostering of critical debate is crucial to the well-being of any culture and any decision which makes critical debate less easy to engage in is, in my view, to be deplored."

**Murdo Macdonald MA PhD LCAD, University of Edinburgh**

"It seems particularly ironic that at a time when serious coverage of innovative visual arts in the national media is shrinking (even the Guardian now seems to have a policy of restricting its regional coverage to 'major' exhibitions) our specialist press is finding it increasingly difficult to command the support of its natural allies within arts funding... The majority of publications we subscribe to are quickly digested, often offering an unappetising fare of overlong interviews, unfocussed reviews, art gossip and dull layout."

**Bryn Biggs, Bluecoat**

"Without such barometers the arts industry will not be able to pace itself nor place itself within the rest of society: financially or culturally."

**Mal Williamson, In House Video**

"A chief factor in Variant maintaining and consolidating its reputation has been its independence from fashionable mainstream art thinking; not functioning merely as a curmudgeonly critical tool, but rather attempting to contextualise many different cultural facets in an intelligent and considered way."

**Simon Herbert, Locus +**

"I know from experience that it is virtually impossible to publish an art journal quarterly without substantial financial backing... I'll bring you up to date on what damage an earthquake can do to an arts organisation."

**Thomas Lawson, California Institute for the Arts**

"Information and education are the central aspects for the European Countries to survive in the growing market of communication and visual communication in the future. To form this future it is necessary to realise the change of paradigms in society as well as to find new humanised approaches to technology."

**Alfred Rotert, European Media Art Festival**

"It is almost as if I am witnessing the demise of the Arts magazines in Britain."

**Ian Mundwilyer, Research Publications**

"Many of the museums in Texas read Variant... it is an important tool for informing spaces around the US about art activity in your region of the world. It is an invaluable resource for finding out about new artists and ideas and influences and which artists they invite to exhibit, perform and lecture. To withdraw funding from such an important information source is like cutting your head off while the body runs around in circles."

**Daniel Plunkett, ND Magazine**

"Given the financial strength of American film production and their influence in the publishing industry, it is unreasonable to assume that independent magazines could finance themselves on the free market. To the contrary: only because the promotion and discussion of European films in magazines like Variant is notoriously underfunded and underestimated—thus making efficient work difficult—many "European" films do not get the attention they deserve. On the other hand, the success of "American" films is often not based on their superior quality but on well-equipped and financed promotional organisations and a critical establishment which can afford to actually write and think about films rather than spending most of their energies on financial questions. The appalling situation of independent European film is a result of a political and socio-cultural attitude which considers every non-American production to be some sort of difficult subtitled art movie. Watching film has become a crucial social ability, a new kind of cultural literacy needing to be developed and supported by professionals. I cannot believe that Scottish authorities have no interest in cultivating a Scottish view on cinematography and film journalism."

**Reinhard Puntigam, Blimp Film Magazine**

"As an arts administrator yourself, you will be aware of the current trend towards cross-artform interaction and collaboration, and that the creative potential of such a trend depends absolutely on the awareness of the artists themselves of activities not only within but also around their own discipline. It is my opinion, speaking as a composer and performer, that the coverage of a wide variety of activity in such a journal as Variant takes an essential part in this process of fostering a more open attitude towards what artists in the various disciplines are doing and perhaps might do next."

**Richard Barrett**

"I'm not sure that any comments from me would actually help Variant—but it seems like a recurring nightmare. To lose one magazine could be called unfortunate, to lose two... Publications cost money. Either you want to support them or you don't. The message from SAC is that it doesn't.

Any discussion in SAC about supporting criticism and discussion should have happened before delivering what could be the coup-de-grace to Variant. To timetable it for later this year seems at best like a policy which is trying to catch up with events."

**Hilary Robinson, University of Ulster**

"Perhaps the most important thing to say is that the Committee was not 'against' Variant. The problem was whether they could continue to offer support, in relation to other priorities. Without going into detail about all the funding decisions it is not possible to completely explain the decision... Taking up your final point, I am not sure personally whether what we want is a glossy magazine which only reaches a very small number of people. If magazines are about encouraging debate perhaps they have to aim to attract a broader visual arts readership than Variant aimed to attract, given its very specific editorial policy."

**Andrew Nairne, in reply to the above**

"I was really very shocked by the withdrawal from Variant. You know what a fine publication I've always considered it, way way above some of its English and European counterparts in its scope and the quality of writing and philosophy."

**Neil Wallace, Programme Director, Tramway**

"As a director of an international experimental and innovative Film and Video festival I am daily confronted with this stupid kind of commercial thinking and it needs a lot of time to convince foundation members and sponsors that it is very important to support innovative and high-quality cultural projects apart from the mainstream entertaining culture."

**Dr. Christoph Settele, Viper, Switzerland**

"Variant represents an aspect of cultural experience which is non-definitive, an open form, where terms like, radical, visionary, self-determination, seem to be very much less a thing of the past than they do when one is confronted with the general depression and neurosis of everyday."

**Cathy Wilkes**

"Many people would agree that one important aspect of a magazine is to serve as a promotional tool for the arts within the region it is based. At a future date, when considering how the gap left by the inevitable demise of Variant is to be filled, the SAC should not presume that a magazine can be nurtured into existence by simply making money available. The quick demise of the relaunched Alba and the failure of Hybrid illustrate the folly of this approach.

Short run Art magazines emerge from, and are supported by a constituency. These are the publications funders have the duty to support."

**Ken Gill**

"It would appear that for a small increase in funding, a vital publication would have been secured that would continue to champion issues of arts development and access. It is curious therefore, that issues of ACCESS and DEVELOPMENT are highlighted in your 'charter for the Arts' policy document...

In Scotland, art institutions are not exactly models of accessibility... Increasingly, the arts are being dictated to by a select few. This is a state of affairs that would seem to contradict the SAC's strategies of Access and development. And yet, through the decision to withdraw funding, you have denied opportunity and restricted access to the arts... Variant reflected my, and many other people's aspirations and hopes for the development of a new arts activity which is grounded in community practice, rather than in the sales rooms and commercial galleries."

**Adam Geary**

"Committee's decision in relation to Variant does not imply a lack of support or interest in encouraging critical debate. However substantial future support for a Scottish based visual arts magazine is unlikely unless it clearly addresses issues and events central to the making, curating and appreciation of contemporary art made or presented in Scotland. The question of art magazines is moreover part of a wider debate about fostering intelligent criticism and discussion, documenting exhibitions and projects, and encouraging both within Scotland and abroad an increasing interest in the work of artists living in Scotland. The Visual Arts Committee will be discussing this subject in detail later in the year."

**Seona Reid, in response to the above**

"Some two years ago I was approached by the ACGB and asked to submit a proposal for a London-based live-arts magazine. The panel specifically mentioned that they enviously took Variant for their model: Had the unwieldy machinery by which ACGB and SAC communicate allowed it, I suspect they would simply have put more money into Variant. My study for this proposal suggested such a magazine was uneconomic, and it comes as no surprise to me to hear that Hybrid, the eventual outcome of ACGB's plans, is now rumoured to be rapidly sinking into debt. However, for a magazine to fail in today's market is not a matter of blame or surprise. What is surprising, and worthy of blame, is that bodies such as the SAC are apparently incapable of recognising that they have before their eyes a flagship which has earned the respect of both the most extreme of art-loathing anarchists and the trendiest of ICA curators—and all in between.

It is incomprehensible to a person such as myself that you should now seek to undo the fine work in which you have had so integral a role: it argues some sudden thick darkness of mind on the part of SAC, indicative to outsiders of a demoralised and gutless institution that is losing its sense of direction and purpose."

**Dr. Edmund Baxter**

"The SAC may be there to promote what it sees as mainstream culture, that is bringing things in from outside, but it is also there to sustain and develop indigenous talent and culture. You cannot force local culture to be something it is not."

**Fiona Byrne-Sutton**

"Your stated grounds for not extending Variant's funding beyond its initial three years was that it was 'unable to produce quarterly issues without significant increase in support'. I would not seek to question the details of your other funding decisions, although I note that no other revenue client has effectively been abolished by you in this funding round.

Instead, I would like to question your strategy. The visual arts, like any other area of the arts, does not survive and grow by art works alone. It needs an infrastructure, a vital part of which is one or more intelligent and critical magazines which make connections between different works and different fields. The benefits of such a magazine, as with all infrastructure, are difficult to trace in detail, especially in the short term. But it is the job of an arts strategy to address such infrastructural needs."

**Nick Couldry**

"I appreciate and note your comments about the need for magazines which make connections. However, the committee's view was that in reading the magazine, because of the specialist nature of most articles, it was actually very difficult to make meaningful connections. The committee does not believe Variant to be a primary part of the infrastructure of the dynamic visual arts constituency in Scotland."

**Andrew Nairne, in response to the above**

"Most people in Scotland, and outwith, are aware that the city of Glasgow is burgeoning with activity, and recognition has not been slow to come. This recognition, as I see it, is based upon the fact that Scotland supports a broad practice within its art community; and that Broad practice is made up of small pockets of intense discussion and application... On the issue of a profile for Scottish art/ideas within the international context: as a younger artist I had to make a decision as to the prospects for a fruitful practise based in Scotland. I, and many others, decided that it was worthwhile to remain, or return to, this country as opposed to any other. It is honest for me to say that this decision was encouraged by several individuals, institutions and publications, if not by word of mouth, then in commanding respect for the activities in which they were engaged. Malcolm Dickson and Variant magazine were key elements, among others. The implications of the SAC's decision on Variant does nothing to encourage me for the future."

**Douglas Gordon**

"Having sat for 3 years on the Arts Council of Great Britain's Art Advisory Committee, and an ACGB magazine review panel... I see no reason to compel a magazine to quarterly deadlines for bureaucratic convenience."

**Anna Harding**

"The health of the cultural situation in this country has depended on the commitment of groups and individuals who... have a remit based not on personal gain but on ensuring the continuation of a healthy growth. It is extremely disheartening to see this commitment so cruelly ignored. That the Council does not acknowledge how their decision will adversely affect the kind of new initiatives required to sustain the vitality of the arts in Scotland is baffling."

**Christine Borland**