

Bad News

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Comments

According to press reports, Scotland faces a nearly certain condemnation in the history textbooks of the twenty-first century. The immediate cause of this shameful fate is the society's attitude to contemporary art. "Culturally, as a nation, we will be judged on how we have treated Mr Richard Demarco", prophesies Giles Sutherland in *The Scotsman* on 11 December. Four days later, in *Scotland on Sunday*, Iain Gale predicts that "the Scots face future vilification as cultural reactionaries," because "the Glasgow Museum of Modern Art contains not one work by any of (a generation of younger Glasgow) artists." Sutherland and Gale are not the first to raise the alarm—just over a year ago, the nation was being publicly cautioned by a bitter painter with a vigorous imagination who complained that his works had been banished to the company of "stuffed giraffes in the Kelvingrove Museum"—but their call to arms rings with a sudden sense of urgency. History doesn't wait. "Unless there is a collective pooling together of resources and energy", warns Sutherland, and "unless something is done very soon", hastens to add Gale, the Scots will be in trouble. They will have to shoulder the blame for the institutional "indifference" which threatens to deprive Demarco's European Art Foundation of its home in Edinburgh's St Mary's school and which denies the talented artists in Glasgow their share of the wall space at the Gallery of Modern Art.

Or worse: this may be a case of a reckless conspiracy of negligence in the face of impending historical embarrassment. The identity of this artistic culture is already being shaped elsewhere, on someone else's terms, and the official domestic "cultural sector" does not even care to come out and play. Iain Gale makes no bones about it. It is "not the established mainstream" but a "close knit-knit body of artists, curators and critics" who are seen abroad "as the ambassadors for a new, epoch making strain of Scottish art." Yet, "when 10 years hence, the history of Scottish art in the 1990s comes to be written, the art itself will not be in Scotland, but in London, Switzerland, Germany and the USA."

This is bad news for the people of Scotland. The nation can rightly demand that its nominal representatives take care of its future reputation. But the stakes are too high and history is not a particularly fair arbiter. The common apex of the bleak prognoses seems to be the suggestion that, in Scotland, the blind rule in the kingdom of the myopic. As the municipal cultural policies and practices of Edinburgh and Glasgow are putting the good name of the country at risk, the community as a whole must be mobilised to do or be damned. It wouldn't be for the first time that history forgets the culprit and condemns the culture. Even where cultural misdemeanours are committed by men of a greater stature, resolve or power than those currently sitting on the committees in the respective city halls, it is their broad constituencies that are made responsible in the final account. Remember, "the Germans" banned Kandinsky from teaching, "the French" put Genet in jail and "the Russians" drove Jesenin to suicide. Passing the responsibility from people onto "the people" is history's oldest trick.

Promises of eternal damnation are often the last resort where all other arguments have failed. But in the case of contemporary art in Scotland, such arguments are yet to be rehearsed. There has not been much public debate, for instance, about the nature of what Gale calls "Scotland's art establishment", nor for that matter about the terms of the "debate on contemporary art in Scotland" itself—despite the record number of column inches devoted to lamentations about the blinkered vision of the former and complaints about the absence of the latter. The "debate", such as there is, seems to suffer from serious confusion. What or who comprises the "art establishment"? By what standard do we define "the mainstream"? What does the word "art" mean in the context of such institutions

as Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art? What do the terms "Europe" or "international" stand for when it comes to the artistic culture of Scotland?

The truth is that we don't quite know—or that we don't even ask. Take for example the Gallery of Modern Art. Its self-proclaimed identity rests squarely within the "entertainment business" (Julian Spalding in *The Herald*, March 28, 1996). As a theme park it surely is one of the finest things outside Las Vegas and Euro Disney. But why on earth do we feel compelled to talk about it as though it had anything to do with art? Or take the generation of artists who are supposedly ignored by and excluded from the "established mainstream". Excluded from what? What is there that the "art establishment" (whatever that means) could offer them? Why would they ever want to be involved with an "establishment" remarkable only by its almost total obscurity and its manifest lack of ambition? (Think of the trickle of decorative pictures juried for seasonal exhibitions by a club of gentleman-painters of a bygone era "world famous in Edinburgh".) Or the collections of contemporary art in Scotland—how do their agendas match the aspirations of work which is determined to assert itself within a living culture? Whatever their individual interests, it is unlikely that Scotland's cultural institutions and its "art establishment", as they are, could provide more than a limited support to the uncompromising commitments of artists who know that the identity of living culture cannot be constrained by geography, let alone by the priorities of municipal politics. Granted, these artists' work should be collected and made more readily available—not because it is Scottish, but because it is often very good. It also is, in many instances and in the most positive sense of the terms, European and international. Indeed, without the artists' efforts international art would not have much presence in Scotland. The same goes for Demarco. He too deserves support because of the genuine international aim of his enterprise—and because he shares with the younger artists the spirit of ambition. The whole culture which they claim as their own is aspirational and outward-looking. They are the ones who belong to the mainstream - not the regulated flow of populist entertainment, but that current in art and culture which engages and makes visible the experience of living in the world.

Just as we seem to massively overrate the cultural importance of institutions and the "establishment", so we underestimate the oppressive power of mediocrity hidden within the institutional culture. This not only stifles the best efforts of those who work within or outside institutions to create a cultural climate of high ambition and excellence which all good art of whatever provenance demands, but it also perpetuates a general sense of limitations. As a result we are too ready to settle for crumbs of official benevolence which may save from closure a gallery in Edinburgh or secure "for the nation" a video work by a young artist, but which will not, in itself, change anything else. And while we listen with sympathy to those well-meaning few who take it upon themselves in the name of "the nation" to lead the charge against "indifference", we fail to notice the tone of dependence in their alarmed voices. They have faith in the merits of the art which they advocate, but they too believe that the supreme gesture of recognition is a seal of approval by officers, local politicians and "Scotland's art establishment". Their anxieties about the future are themselves signs of surrender to the creeping regime of the official and the ideology of institutional culture. Their concerns are ultimately compromised by the very terms of their arguments. Unless these terms are questioned and challenged, all the practical victories which the "collective pooling together of resources and energy" could bring about may still be our symbolic defeats. And this is the real danger today, no matter what history might think of it "10 years hence".

Meanwhile the public can be best advised to forget the judgement of posterity and to concern itself with

the message of ambition that contemporary art contributes to our sense of who we are right now. The nation can be assured that cultural identity is not made up of institutions nor is it authenticated by them. Even less is it fabricated by planning departments or museums. Rather, it is formed by the tensions between what people do and what they aspire to. In its verdict on our attitudes to art and culture, history will look kindly at those who do not bow to mediocrity - which will undoubtedly be recognised as the tyranny of the late twentieth century.