

# Under the Central

## John Beagles

SCOTTISH BASED artists returning from abroad, frequently complain of the romantic, idealistic picture many seem to have of artistic life in Scotland.

Londoners in particular seem to need to believe in Scotland (Glasgow specifically) as the home of egalitarian, socialist co-operatives where everyone supports and nurtures in a pseudo cultural wonderland. The reality, of course, is infinitely more complicated and contradictory. The idea that the lack of private contemporary galleries in Scotland is responsible for the present flowering of artistic production, glosses over the competing and conflicting pressures that exclusive public funding generates. The following partial sketch of gallery activity is designed to shed some light on the nefarious shenanigans, disputes and moves which have taken place of late in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Transmission Gallery is probably one of the best known venues in Scotland for contemporary art. Possessing a formidable reputation, based largely on its breaking in of many of Glasgow's most successful

resulted in explicit and implicit pressure (from within and without) falling on those 'taking over the mantle' for more of the same. This has the effect of producing something of an identity problem for the gallery, unable to effectively escape the confines of what was expected of it, it had frequently succumbed to tried and tested avenues. For a while you knew what you were going to get at a 'Transmission Show'.

Lately, however things have markedly picked up, recasting the original ideas and spirit that originally propelled Transmission to prominence. Casting their net wider than before has thrown up some genuine surprises, such as "21 Days of Darkness" and "Hong Kong Island". This coupled with a newly rediscovered impetus to exhibit some of the rising hotshots of international art (the artists then known as Art Club 2000, Paul McCarthy and coming soon Alex Bag) and a frequently interesting basement space (which in accepting members' applications allowed a limited reappearance of gallery democracy—there's still the suspicion, however, of the basement being where the naughty children are sent). All this and the commitment of the new committee has helped to navigate Transmission out of predictable waters. Its recent increase in arts council funding, after a protracted freeze, was long overdue.

While new Transmission operatives are no doubt almost exclusively responsible for this turn around, a developing friendly rivalry with Scotland's other artists run space, the Collective in Edinburgh, is playing its part.

The Collective Gallery has in the last two years also had its share of hits. Zoe Walker, Spencer Finch, Terry Atkinson, Dave Shrigley and Chantel Joffe have all shown there, as well as less well known local artists in gallery curated shows such as "Rear View". Its investment in a project room, designed

to allow for short term projects, prompted Transmission to follow suit, while its development of a free listing guide has helped to significantly inform the cultural stew in Scotland.

At present, its only noticeable shortcomings are its inability to secure quality international work, either for solo shows or as part of larger group shows (something Transmission has been consistently successful at) and its rather limited brief, which has it too exclusively tied to representing Edinburgh artists (the local art College is hardly a fertile ground for up and coming talent, while the city itself has less of an arts community to draw upon than Glasgow).

While the Collective has noticeably improved, the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh's other venue for contemporary art has taken what looks like a plunge into mediocrity. While it has been popular to accuse Charles Esche, head of Glasgow's Tramway Gallery, of misusing public funds by pursuing an exhibition policy more akin to a private gallery, Graham Murray, Fruitmarket's 'surpremo', has somehow managed to

largely avoid the accusation. However of the two, the mud sticks more persuasively to Murray. Steadfastly following a path dictated by his personal predilections, he has demonstrated a disinterest in most 'contemporary' art (especially Scottish). Instead, he has opted for staging 'discovery' shows of new Asian art (China and Japan with India to come) with group and solo exhibitions of romanticised, elemental work.

Bubbling under the surface of the Fruitmarket's exhibition programme, there has been a tangible, almost exclusive orientation towards that traditional nexus, the Artist and Nature. Holed up within the confines of the gallery, lies an unreconstructed modernism, where the artist remains the sole creator of *his* work, authentic materials imbued with meaning abound and everywhere there is the promise of an art of quasi-religious transformation.

With only a couple of notable exceptions, the Fruitmarket has increasingly begun to behave like a bastion of self professed good taste, ardently protecting all that is proper and right about art, in the face of a perceived onslaught of young British artists' childish, puerile fantasies.

In this drawing room, where aesthetic propriety is the master, the only fart to be heard of late was Pierrick Sorin's video works, from the gallery curated-show of French artists "In/conclusive States". The sight of Sorin videoing his own arse, an exercise designed to squeeze humour out of introspective probing, finally managed to levitate the heavy cloud of solemnity which had engulfed the gallery. How long the Fruitmarket can survive, behaving like an irritated ostrich with its head in the sand, is tellingly up for grabs at present. A shave off its art council funding has seen to that. It's about time the Fruit Market looked outside of 'itself' for some revitalisation, when it does (as in In/conclusive States and hopefully the Lectures Beyond Art and Science) it's a breath of fresh air.

If the Fruitmarket is the cankerous old uncle of Scottish Art, harping on about the good old days when you knew where you were, the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow (the C.C.A.), often comes across as suffering from a mid-life crisis. Lurching from notable highs (Ross Sinclair's "Rocky Mountain") to depressing lows ("Phenomena", the "Wallpaper show"), its exhibition policy could arguably point to a lack of artistic conviction, opting instead to reference all the 'right' cultural bases, in an over eager attempt to please everyone.

Sinclair's show, a full size reconstruction of a slice of prime Scottish hillside, complete with stuffed animals, a running stream and the folk warbling of the artist sitting in his hilltop hut, was an exceptional example of the gallery sticking its neck out. His complex, humorous and contradictory take on that popular chestnut 'National identity', was a welcome interjection into an increasingly polarised and simplistic political and cultural debate (arguments raging over both Glasgow's Museum of Modern Art—what was 'real' Scottish Art—and Euro 96). The C.C.A.'s support for a local, internationally successful artist, offering him a platform to produce new work at 'home', as opposed to shipping it out of Scotland, was exemplary. Unfortunately the C.C.A. seems as equally interested,



ZOE WALKER Portable Paradise Collective Gallery 1996

art stars, its being consistently perceived as the hip, young thing of Scottish Art. However, over the past two years this reputation has often looked precarious. Its previously innovative approach to exhibition programming, which had it leaping from solo shows of Jo Spence to group shows mixing Lawrence Weiner with then little known local artists (Douglas Gordon for example), had increasingly started to look like a 'radical' agenda slowly solidifying into a predictable orthodoxy.

The problem for newer committee members is 'following in the footsteps' of the successful godparents of new Scottish art, artists such as Ross Sinclair and Christine Borland, involved in Transmission in its earlier days. These and other equally well known artists, had themselves broken the stranglehold of the 'Glasgow boys', booting their parochialism into touch and waving good-bye to their council flavoured, stereotypical, painterly representations of 'real working class life'. The high profile careers this relatively recent generation of 'Transmission' artists embarked upon,

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if not more so, in developing and expanding its other exhibition strategy, the themed group show.

C.C.A. themed group shows curated by hired guns (Francis McKee the most recent and decided) variously try to hang individual artists works on advertising hooks. Creating tidy packages examining 'hot issues' ("Phenomena", UFO's, X-Files, end of the millennium; "Lost Ark", humanity/nature; "Inbetweener", gender/identity) they have in their strenuous attempts to cover all the angles, frequently ended up missing all the points. While the range of the exhibited works is often interesting, it's often hard to escape the feeling that the individual pieces are secondary, with the curator's concept the main attraction. Whereas heavily curated shows like those organised by BANK in London, have succeeded by virtue of their wilful belligerence about appearing virtuous, the C.C.A.'s shows in their nod at this issue, wave at that issue, frequently end up producing something less than the sum of its parts.

The rise of the 'curator superstar', essentially seems nothing more than a mutation of that classic modernist division of labour, whereby the critic (everybody needs a Benjamin Buchloh) becomes the mouth piece for the artist. In Scotland's ever increasing bureaucratic culture industry, the new breed of free floating curator, rapidly assumes the position of cultural manager, liaising and brokering on behalf of the artist with both the gallery (heh I got a great idea for a show) and the public (we got some great films and some of that art stuff too). In Glasgow, ravaged as it is by a deep schism between its art intelligentsia and the public, brokering of this kind through the catch all theme show, is an attractive prospect for administrators pressured by accusations of elitism desperate for some populist clothing.

The C.C.A.'s interest in such crossover shows utilising all of its facilities, also stems from its immanent redevelopment (with lottery money) into a more self sufficient centre for all contemporary arts. This kind of art centre was originally what Charles Esche had envisaged and planned for the Tramway Gallery, unfortunately Esche's departure makes the future of the gallery look far from secure.

Under Esche's control the Tramway won the 1996 Prudential prize, a jackpot of £25,000. While this was almost universally recognised amongst the 'progressive' members of Glasgow's art community as being well deserved, local council commissars chose to ignore it, continuing instead with their policy of putting the boot in. Esche undoubtedly made some mistakes in his exhibition strategy, the simplistic universalism of the show "Trust", with its call to arms, "to suspend disbelief" and the previously mentioned accusation that he was rather too transparently using the gallery as a launch pad for an exclusive stable of artists, didn't help in his dealings with a suspicious and openly antagonistic arts establishment. However when it came down to it, what eventually sunk his plans for Tramway, was its location. While its south side position is geographically close to the heart of the city, symbolically for culture mulchas, it might as well be in London. Esche had professed a hope for the gallery becoming a fully fledged art centre, with a studio complex (for local and visiting international

artists), darkrooms, cafe, cinema and so on. Occasionally Tramway had succeeded in generating sufficient energy to convince that this was a viable project, however the increasingly apparent problem lay in sustaining this energy over a protracted period of time. With the potential audience for Tramway's brand of 'neo-conceptualism' being relatively small (drawn as it is almost exclusively from the artistic community of the city) Esche eventually and grudgingly had to accept that there was a finite limit to his expansionist plans for the gallery.

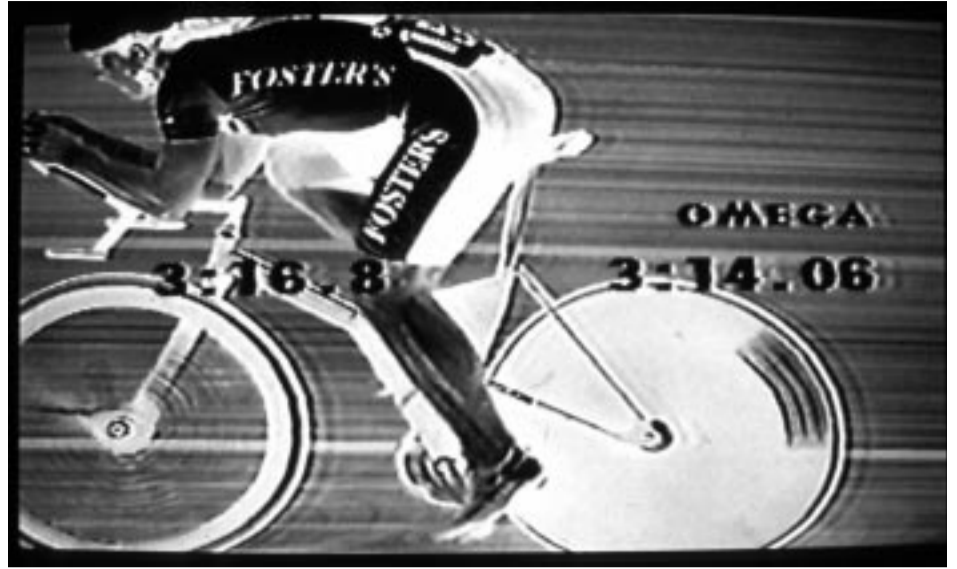
Redirecting his energies, his new incarnation will be as overseer of an 'artangel like body', instigating public and private art projects with local and international artists in Scotland, his first venture has been the recent "Wish you were here too", organised with local artists Dave Wilkinson and Beata Veszely in their Glasgow flat. While Flat shows have become relatively popular of late, I hope that with Esche and his floating art body, they don't become the rule. Their hermetic approach, advertising through the usual channels, preaching exclusively to the converted, is OK as far as it goes, but I can't help feeling its popularity might again be symptomatic of how the polarised cultural climate in Glasgow produces a pendulum like response to the problems of "reaching a wider, more unfamiliar, audience for art".

A productive example of a 'show outside the gallery', which avoided the patronising tone of many a parachuted in public art project I've had the misfortune to walk over this year, was Graham Ramsay and Simon Payne's show "Bleep Bleep Bleep" at Diva Records, Glasgow.

"Bleep Bleep Bleep", an exhibition of artist produced 12 inchers in a specialist dance, music shop, succeeded in amusingly and productively disrupting many expectations about shows outside the gallery. At Diva, confusion and incomprehensibility existed in an unusually more equidistant, productive relationship. The seasoned record buyer, armed with extensive information about labels, DJ's etc., found themselves confronted and bemused by the presence of labels, DJ's, they'd never heard of (a Club Adorno release for instance), while the members of the art audience, unable to instantly seek, find and enjoy the art, had none of their specialist skill's validated (at the private view many people thought the 'art' was the DJ's set, the artist produced 'fake' 12 inchers passing them by). Unusually at Diva, members of the art community might have left feeling bored and out of place.

The Scottish art scene occupies a particularly precarious position at pre-

DAVID NOONAN *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space: Cycling*  
Transmission Gallery 1996



sent. On the one hand it's continuing to successfully expand, with home grown and Scottish based artists consistently attracting national and international attention, while simultaneously, these same artists operate in cities hovering on the threshold of economic, social and political collapse. How long it can continue to maintain this present status, in the face of such pressures, is something which may well be beyond its control.

PIERRICK SORIN *C'est Mignon Tout Ça* Fruitmarket Gallery 1996