

Archipelago: Perspectives by Dr Jon Blackwood (2016)

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The roots of *Archipelago* lie in a few parallel, contingent events that I will explain, in turn.

The first of these was a period that I spent living around the territories of ex-Yugoslavia between 2011 and 2014, and in trying to work with and understand how contemporary art is produced, discussed and shown in these contexts, in particular Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Skopje in Macedonia.

As territories that were formerly part of a multi-national socialist state, now independent, these are spaces that continue to experience the profound and on-going traumas of post-socialist transformation in the last twenty-five years. The arts sector has not been immune to these fundamental changes. Artists at mid career level, like the artists who participate in our exhibition, can remember the cultural policies of former Yugoslavia and its investment in arts education, arts institutions and artists; these increasingly sepia-tinted memories are thrown into painful relief by the chronic lack of funding for artists and art institutions at present, and the hopelessness of being able to “get by” somehow as a full time artist.

In spite of these conditions, artists still make exhibitions, curators still curate, and what’s left of an interested public still attend. These are art worlds that operate on goodwill, enthusiasm and private initiative; where support is sought from family members, private funds or an interested businessman; where a lively, risk-taking local practice can open out the possibility of international residencies and put a name near the top of a list for every open call. It is an art world aware of a different past, but engaged grimly with a ruthless entrepreneurial present. The persistent resourcefulness of artists operating at an international level from these spaces, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina’s Adela Jušić or Macedonia’s OPA (Obsessive Possessive Aggression), is one of the distinguishing hallmarks of artists who have developed the ability to transcend the limitations and difficulties of local scenes, whilst remaining part of them.

Somehow, somewhere, there is a belief or faith that one day these atrophied art worlds, where old Yugoslav-era institutions continue to exist as best they can with less than one per cent of their former budgets, will one day operate again at their former level, with funding and opportunities again at the level of partner institutions within the European Union. Unfortunately, this positivism, this belief that somehow somewhere things will get better, belies all the available evidence. Funding for contemporary art is very low on the list of priorities of ethno-nationalist kleptocracies, and it is hard to see how this will shift without fundamental change in all other aspects of these societies.

But this belief that things will eventually change and things will get better is critical to the creation of space for artists and art workers to continue as they do. Back in Scotland, that fundamental belief, that things will improve and that in the meantime it is important to produce and endure, stuck with me, as I began to compare the conditions for contemporary art in my own country with those that I had experienced in Bosnia and Macedonia.

On paper, there is no comparison at all. Taking into account the “Glasgow miracle”- now fading rapidly into history- as the founding stone of the ecosystem of contemporary art in that city, the growth and persistence of national institutions in Edinburgh, and the cultural renaissance of Dundee, acknowledged recently as “one of Britain’s coolest small cities”, seen from the Balkans, contemporary art in Scotland is resourced and organised in a manner that has simply not obtained there since 1991.

Yet look a little closer. In 2016, Inverleith House has closed as a contemporary art space, provoking outrage and a flash social media-driven campaign; the exhibiting space of Glasgow Sculpture studios, long established as a space where experimental and established practices could sit alongside one another, has also stopped working; south of the border, the New Art Gallery in Walsall, a living symbol of the millennial lottery funded era, is in dire threat of closing due to the shredding of local authority finances and budgetary independence in austerity; these examples are the headline stories of a grim narrative underlining the ever increasing precariousness of art’s position as a provocative spark to the public imagination, a soft tapping on the shoulder to stop for five minutes and engage with something else other than one’s personal battle to survive.

Neil Mulholland wrote, in 2005, that :

“Art in Scotland is something of a cottage industry, but it is nevertheless quite clearly structured and divided into perceived centres and peripheries.”

It has been a commonplace to observe that Scotland (with the exception of Grangemouth and, until recently, Aberdeen) was in a post-industrial phase. I suspect that we are also now in a post-cottage-industrial phase in Scottish art, where the hegemony of the “perceived centres”, if not coming to an end, is certainly under severe scrutiny, and the former “peripheries” are coming into much sharper focus.

Referring back to the earlier example of perceptions of contemporary art from a Balkan perspective, it seems far less likely that contemporary art structures from there will replicate those of a country like Scotland, than it is for the art world of Scotland in the future to resemble the current situation in the Balkans. The lengthening in the gaps between drips from the tap of public funding, the managerialist obsession with “transparency”, centralisation and marketization, and the political habit of claiming association with the successes of visual art, whilst at the same time wringing hands when asked to pay for it, all rather suggest that the trajectory of development is that our art

world will become ever less resourced and ever more reliant on free labour, good will and private initiative in the years ahead.

A comparison of different territories and differing contemporary art worlds has been a critical process underpinning the show. Perhaps a more specific event was a series of conversations with David Blyth in Aberdeen towards the end of 2015, on the subject of the nineteenth century German botanist and illustrator, Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). Initially, these conversations revolved around Haeckel's remarkable publication, *Kunstformen der Natur* (1899-1904). Haeckel remains a controversial historical figure as one of the chief intermediaries for Darwinism in Germany, and an early mouthpiece of the "scientific racism" that underpinned European fascisms in the twentieth century.

Haeckel's intricate visualisations of biological formations, in particular the *radiolarians*, with their delicate skeletal formations, grow just as much from Haeckel's deeply felt romantic attitude towards nature and its infinite variations. His two volumes of beautiful biological drawings, critically, show forms in nature imagined in their ideal state; and moreover illustrate his ideas of the evolution of natural forms in response to their continually changing environments. Over time, Haeckel's work insisted that ontogeny reflected phylogeny; in other words, that the development of individual organisms had to be mapped closely to an understanding of the development of the surrounding environment.

From that discussion, and linked to the earlier comparison of differing manifestations of contemporary art in the Balkan and Scottish contexts, the idea of art as an ecosystem began to emerge; the idea that specific practices and the development of specific careers could be opened out by an understanding of the multiple environmental factors (social class, common imaginary, education, moral universe, networks of influence, politicisation, socialisation) impacting upon them, and how these factors warp and mutate in the twist of individual sensibility.

A series of broader categorisations began to underpin the idea of *Archipelago*; the desire to present the work of artists who interact imaginatively with a supposedly peripheral surrounding; artists who work imaginatively with source material from the natural world and who are capable of presenting multiple parallel imaginaries; artists who work largely as independent practitioners with a very specific vision in relation to their surroundings; artists between whom there is both visual affinity, and a specific arcanity of visual language.

From these broad categories Derrick and Alan were invited, and the final make up of the show was agreed upon. *Archipelago*, then, offers very specific examples of independent contemporary practice; perhaps, it points towards the emergence of a contemporary art world less centred in the urban networks of late and post modernism, and a retreat to a scattered sea of linked, off-grid, alternatively networked patterns of co-operation.

In the period of neoliberal capitalism, which began to break apart in the global credit crunch of 2008, and whose end was prefigured in 2016 with the election of opportunist populists, and the collapse of the political centre, artists were strongly encouraged to see themselves as “creative entrepreneurs”, taking risks in the development of work, desperately trying to attract their crumb from the rapidly diminishing loaf of public funding, and then looking hopefully to attract trade in a marketplace ever more impatient and ever more lacking in time to process and understand the resulting artworks.

Moreover, the artist-as-neoliberal entrepreneur was encouraged to play a role in filling the void left by an impotent civil society and ever less influential welfare state, by developing socially engaged practices; practices which purport to place the artist in a vanguard role, leading a public towards the better, in ways not seen since the high modernist period. As Claire Bishop shows in her canonical text *Artificial Hells* (2012), the result of such endeavours is often not lasting change in individual lives or communities, but rather lasting change in the career prospects of the artist(s) involved. At its worst, socially engaged art is little more than a banal fusion of 1970s community art, and the final outworking of “Third Way” thinking, using public art as a crude sticking plaster aiming at community cohesion, orbiting around a nostalgic visualisation of a more socially cohesive industrial past.

In short, the neoliberal period has seen the *appropriation* of the language of radical collective activity from the 1960s and 1970s, in the service of the radical individualism and consumerisation of our present. Fiercely competitive open calls for funding are couched in the language of social inclusion, diversity and communitarianism. More broadly, the language and analysis of *Das Kapital* was widely applied by bankers and venture capitalists to explain the financial collapse of 2008 and the taxpayer funded bail-out that followed.

It seems to me that, in order to reverse this process, or at least hold it up to critical scrutiny, that we have to use this energy against itself; to re-appropriate the language of radical individualism in order to re-claim some idea of a genuine solidarity, as opposed to the current commodified appearance of commonality, that plays out in much contemporary visual culture. Just as the earliest germs of neoliberal thinking were emerging at a time when public policy was focused on the welfare state, and the construction of a fairer society in the wake of a defeated totalitarianism in the 1940s, so too the notion of a radical, post-work individualism, linked in as part of a push towards broader, social goals, can develop at a time where the segueing of neoliberalism into ethno-nationalist populism can induce little more than an unproductive despair.

In this context, then, the metaphor of an Archipelago becomes very germane, as does the choice of the artists; the islets of creativity each with their own character yet, subtly interwoven in their affinities of interest and research. David Blyth’s work is most notable for its gentle mixture of craftsmanship, imagination, and our awareness of the time taken in the production of his suite of Haeckel-inspired prints. David’s work evidences a long

process of incubation, through research and through walking and observing the landscape near to Huntly; his desire to capture the importance of the *radiolarians* in that landscape, and the chance discovery of some old wallpaper, in an abandoned house, that gave shape and form to these ideas. There is also a shamanic sensibility in David's work, a thoughtful inversion of the relationship between man and animal, that questions fundamentally our interaction with the environment and the other species who inhabit it.

I have had the good fortune to see Derrick Guild's work develop at close quarters for a decade now. Derrick's mastery of the methodologies of traditional painting, and his immersion in the work of European painters from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as Albrecht Dürer, and Juan Sanchez Cotán, produces a remarkable contemporary insight into what we think we know about objects, and the interaction of scientific fact and anecdotal myth. Fundamental to his practice is the notion of *duende*; a Spanish word untranslatable in English, but which connotes an ability to attract and engage others, the intense pain and pleasure possible in a creative process, psychological darkness and an awareness of death; the fundamental contradictions of creativity and destruction. His paintings from his period spent on Ascension Island illustrate this quality perfectly; they are images that can seemingly be understood spontaneously, without much effort, but which continue to reveal secrets and unexpected surprises the more one returns to look at them; a thrilling process of unsettling disintegration.

Alan Grieve, of all three artists, has produced a body of work that maps most closely to the idea of an individual island; his drawings invite the viewer onto Inchfuckery, a little known territory on the Firth of Forth, between the artist's native Dunfermline and here; an island in the terrifying grip of Fat Curt, where seemingly monotonous scenarios can produce terrifying and unexpected results. These drawings are rooted in working class humour, the kailyard Gothic, and exhibit a markedly surreal twist.

Alan's base is in the Workspace, a combined hairdressing salon and art project space which he co-founded at the beginning of this decade, not long after finishing five years of study at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee; his stories and visions derive from the crossover and occasional clash between these two worlds, as well as from his observations of Dunfermline; from the graveyard stories he presented at workspace in 2015, to zebras outside the Pars' East End Park, to the merging of nineteenth century gothic with twenty first century youth culture that are represented in these drawings. Dunfermline's workspace is not merely a space for Alan and his fellow artists to show work, it is also a grassroots initiative that has grown a substantial audience for contemporary art in the town, an audience not normally reached by more established art institutions.

Such, then, are the contours of our archipelago. If, as contended earlier in this essay, that contemporary art in Scotland is now in its post-cottage-industrial phase, and is gradually moving towards a place where art will have to survive- as it does in the Western Balkans- with virtually no public support and reliant on individual enthusiasm and initiative, then

these three artists are just some of the islets in a rich archipelago of creativity stretching from Wigtownshire to Orkney, beyond the formerly hegemonic centres, that invite much more attention than they have had until now. It is robust and well founded individual practices such as these that will cohere together in the future, reacting with great imaginative resource in helping to shape a common peripheral environment.

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