

Why is there only one Monopolies Commission?

Early in February 1976 an article written by Colin Simpson appeared in *The Sunday Times Business News* which suggested that Treasury eyebrows had been raised at the use of Government funds to acquire works of art which included a “stack of 120 firebricks.” The story sparked an eruption in the popular Press which would make Carl Andre’s *Equivalent VIII* the best known work of contemporary art in Britain. The populist assault on contemporary art that followed, constituted a Machiavellian manoeuvre designed to favour monetarist policies introduced that January by Chancellor Denis Healy. On the one hand it underlined an area desperately in need of disciplinary cuts in public expenditure. On the other hand, it created a temporary spectacle to divert the healthy, employed sections of the populace from the effects that cuts have on those who rely on the Welfare State. Given that the implication of monetarist policies resulted in a substantial rise in unemployment, it is hardly surprising to find that art scandals played an increasingly important part in tabloid politics following 1976. An important part of the success of such tactical manoeuvres by the Labour Right lay in their capacity to separate any perceived negative effects of monetarist policy (such as rising unemployment) from apparent successes (such as putting a stop to inflation and the public funding of ‘rubbish’ art). The art world provided an ideal scapegoat since it is administered by quasi-autonomous governmental organisations. This means that popular arts supported by arts funding bodies can be seen to benefit from monetarist policy, since they are Governmental organisations. Simultaneously arts councils could be held responsible for unpopular, modern art since they are, after all, (quasi)autonomous. Of course, ending public subsidy would have forced artists to behave, but Governments and Councils knew that this would leave them without their pawns.

Following the Second-World-War, a newly professionalised culturalist intelligentsia had opted for state education as the mechanism by which its culture might be preserved and extended as the centre of resistance to the driving imperatives of an increasingly materialist civilisation. The ideology and lifestyle of culturalist academics and the ‘civilised ruling classes’ who were their associates, were central to the post-war Labour Government’s conception of a new society. Individualism and Socialism were to be developed in tandem by democratising intellectual privilege. Labour Governments had aimed to use collective wealth to invest in a programme of education, and so, in the long run, replace the ‘manual’ industrial economy of low wages and long hours with an ‘intellectual’ post-industrial economy of short hours and high wages (Harold Wilson’s ‘white heat of technology’). In this, Labour culturalists heralded a society not bound together by economic market contracts, but by citizenship. Rational citizens would be educated enough to understand that their high quality of life was dependent on supporting a generous level of public provision, allowing the gradual ascendancy the Labour Party’s vision of democratic socialism while ensuring that existing power structures remained unaltered.

Gaining secure, intellectual employment from public bureaucracies due to improved subsidised opportunity, arts administrators were good examples of what was expected of culturalist ‘citizens.’ As such, British arts administrations generally accepted that the ‘knowledgeable will to form’ had to be publicly legitimated and controlled in order to ensure its social benefits. This sensibility, however, had become increasingly incompatible with much state sponsored art in the mid-seventies. The question arises as to whether or not it was deliberately incompatible. Could the lower instruments of human depravity also be a guarantee of public good? On the 18th of October 1976, COUM Transmissions’ *Prostitution* opened at the ICA, a retrospective guaranteed to dislocate human cultivation and public order. The infamous exhibition, which featured pornography, used tampons and mag-gots, was met with a furious attack by veteran right-

winger Nicholas Fairbairn in language that echoed the Arts Council’s defence of ‘cultural value.’¹ That Fairbairn should have mimicked some of the Arts Council’s rhetoric while criticising the activities it endorsed should come as no surprise. Fairbairn, like the Arts Council, clearly endorsed the notion of art as the cultural activity of the educated class to which he belonged. However, even such incongruous work could be defended on Fairbairn’s grounds in that it offered the culturalist cognoscenti a brief, well-charted escapade into anarchism. Indeed, this was precisely the ICA’s position.² Confronted with such liberal curatorial practices, it became customary for ‘new’ art historians to argue that art since the mid-1970s does not force a new set of critics to adopt a new way of seeing since it is always already publicly legitimated by educated figures: “...the objections raised by columnists in the popular Press are quite irrelevant, because the critical and curatorial success of [Andre’s] work as modern art was achieved quite independently of such reservations (where originally, as in the case of [Manet’s] Olympia, [...]) a sense of the modern was constructed, to a certain extent, out of the commentaries of critics.”³ While this comprehensive claim might elucidate one possible difference between ‘modernist’ and ‘postmodernist’ art worlds, its wider implications remain to be judged against the specific cultural and political contradictions which took place in Britain around the question of cultural and economic paternalism during the 1970s.

It might be argued that much of the late modernist cognoscenti of the mid-1970s had deliberately effected a reversal of the Arts Council’s culturalist aims, using public money and the media with the specific intent of offending, as opposed to ‘altering’, the public sensibility. This could be countered by the fact that COUM Transmissions had consistently aimed to make art popular by seeking more ‘direct’ forms of experience. Yet any critical potential of COUM’s work was in turn eroded by the common understanding fabricated by cultural administrators and the press, that the opposing face of the culturalist status quo was a monetarist mirror image. COUM’s assault on culturalist mystification, therefore, inadvertently aided the cause of monetarist ‘modernisers’ of the Labour Right who were, after all, the producers of the powerful media sensationalism which COUM rallied against. The assault on culturalism rapidly became a vast graveyard where the Left and the institutionalised avant-garde went to die. Both were forced into an impossible position whereby they could not have their negations and their politics too. One of the few groups of avant-gardists to recognise this were COUM, who used the opening night of the *Prostitution* exhibition to abruptly abandon the art world, re-launching themselves as the industrial band *Throbbing Gristle*. With the art world’s ideals scarred by the ‘failure’ of the 70s late-avant-garde, new art historian T.J. Clark was soon able to ‘convincingly’ proclaim that “the moment at which negation and refutation becomes simply too complete; they [the late avant-garde] erase what they meant to negate, and therefore no negation takes place; they refute their prototypes to effectively and the old dispositions are—sometimes literally—painted out; they ‘no longer apply’.”⁴

The relationship between an intellectually demanding culture, museums as institutions which legitimise this difficulty, and the corresponding industry of explanation, was quickly identified by a large number of producers and administrators of British art as the matter for practical and critical engagement. To remain independent of popular reservations was deemed suicidal, as the threat to their secure, intellectual employment now came from the State. Citizens who feared an end to their privileged status were therefore forced to contrive an impetus for the initial rejection of modernism in Britain. As the New Right’s populism gained in audibility, critics and artists who had professed an affinity with the political avant-garde pretended to jump from their sinking Arts Council ship. What they were in fact doing was ensuring that their

status became both the object and content of their work, thereby guaranteeing their positions at the locus of high popular visual culture. Given that former advocates of modernist culture did not have to deviate from their usual practice of incessantly describing their own activities, it might appear futile to argue that any cultural shift took place at all. Yet contrary to the claims of new art historians, (who were major benefactors of this subtle ‘shift’), it might be alleged that the sense of the post-modern in Britain was constructed out of the commentaries of its critics. Such a claim rests on determining the extent to which the New Right were unwittingly aided by the coterie of ex-modernist cultural administrators who re-emerged in 1976 as neo-Marxist ambassadors of cultural change. Although they pronounced their indignation at the fecklessness of art under capitalism, and promulgated a crisis in contemporary art, the ‘Crisis Critics’ primary task was to question paternalistic attitudes towards the visual arts while ensuring lucrative future careers for themselves with the British Arts Council.

In 1976 Richard Cork published a themed issue of *Studio International* on ‘Art and Social Purpose’ in which he first began referring to himself as a “committed socialist.” For the next two years, Cork was perpetually at pains to state that the British art world’s lofty modernist ideals were arrogant myths. Following Raymond Williams’ lead, he argued that high art’s ‘objective standards’ could only be available to the elite (of which he was a member). Since high art was the culture of the elite, the general public could only ever understand or appreciate high art if they adopted the ideology of the elite (a fact which the Arts Council never disputed).⁵ In order to remedy this situation, Cork proposed “to restore a sense of purpose, to accept that artists cannot afford for a moment longer to operate in a vacuum of specialised discourse without considering their function in wider and more utilitarian terms.”⁶ Despite his allegedly radical intent, Cork’s dual emphasis on the need for art to play a utilitarian role while ‘exposing’ social depravation (caused by bad government) played into the hands of the New Right.

A man of many contradictions, Cork spent 1978 organising *Art For Whom?* and *Art for Society*, a series of gallery exhibitions intended to persuade artists to forgo the gallery system in order to make art for ‘ordinary people’. In May 1978, *Art & Language*⁷ strongly criticised *Art for Society* for having “become a rallying point of the self-promotional activities of the soi-disant left typified by the ‘socialist artist’ Conrad Atkinson’s fearless expose of the Queen Mother as an aristocrat.”⁸ As the correspondence pages of arts magazines were filled once more with letters criticising another series of Arts Council debacles, the issues raised specifically by ‘social artists’ were obscured by the main narcissistic theme of practice and debate during the late 1970s: who ran the art world? Atkinson’s analysis of the situation was fairly accurate:

“...the Arts Council of Great Britain is attempting to move into a dominating and decisive role (e.g. ‘inescapable editorial responsibility’) in the arts in preparation for the eighties. This will, I believe, see a ‘tightening up’ of the ‘problematic’ areas of art practice, particularly, though not exclusively, in the visual arts. Thus the work funded will be more populist (towards a visual arts ‘Cross-roads’). In my opinion this will affect work in all media but most vulnerable will be documentation, work with socio-political content, performance work and work which is contentious and moves outside the accepted norms.”⁹

Clarification of the shift towards a safe “visual arts Cross-roads” had already emerged in the form of Andrew Brighton and Lynda Morris’ exhibition *Towards Another Picture*, which took place at the end of 1977. Conspicuous inclusions were works by academic and populist painters such as Terence Cuneo who depicted Lord Mayors and steam trains, and David Shepherd, who specialised in African wildlife—especially elephants. In stressing the show’s ‘grass-roots appeal’ with such inclusions, the organisers were attempting to claim a non art world audience and

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thereby create a 'radical' alternative to the Tate Gallery and Arts Council perspective on British art.

Remarkably envisioning that this positioned the museum institution under scrutiny while attacking the "intellectual vacuity, indolence, corruption and self-perpetuating mediocrity of the art world".¹⁰ Brighton wrote of how "art history, properly practised, is part of cultural history. The task of those constructing a history of our times is to examine and understand the uses of art in our culture, not to reinforce the evaluation of one section of the art market by giving them doubtful historical lineage."¹¹ The form of critical culture envisaged in Brighton's brand of crisis criticism was impossible to achieve since, in the present political circumstances, the very concept of an educated culture implied limits on accessibility. Brighton, luckily enough, was there, at the centre of the new omnidirectional, postmodern art world, ready to explain all. The use of art in his culture was to perpetuate this situation. Brighton refused to recognise an old-chestnuts, namely, why might anyone wish to "question the unilinear account of twentieth-century art"¹² without first learning of it through the form of paternalistic education once provided by the Arts Council? Again, Brighton would administrate the case against cultural administration.

Julian Spalding missed the Crisis Critic vogue, a letter to *Art Monthly* in 1979 criticising Conservative cuts in funding to the V&A leaving no impression.¹³ By 1984, the Director of Sheffield's City Council's Arts Department had learned how to capitalise on the many of the motifs manufactured by the Crisis Critics towards the end of the 70s, combining them with Peter Fuller's parochialism and the ruthless commercial exploitation of the New Image:

"The tide has now turned on the New York School, and the art capital has swung back, not to Paris, but to Germany, home of Expressionism. We are now witnessing a revival of figurative expressionism hall-marked by its large scale and bold brushwork. [...] Many young artists are tackling once again the problem of figurative composition and are beginning to rediscover the potential of oil paint, a technique virtually outlawed for more than two decades. It is timely, then, to mount an exhibition of works by the last artists in Britain who painted figuratively on a large scale in oil and who also absorbed some expressionist influences from the continent. In the process they created a school of painting that was original, rich, powerful and impressive and deserves to be re-instated into the history of British art."¹⁴

The Forgotten Fifties, an exhibition of the Kitchen Sink School, gained Spalding a greater measure of publicity, touring from Sheffield, to Norwich, Coventry, and Camden. Opportunist criticism came from John Roberts, who admonished that there "is no 'straight' road through to the social as was reflected in '50s painting, because realism as such can no longer capture the world so openly, so saguinely; realism must come—and has come—under new auspices."¹⁵ (Roberts'/Terry Atkinson's auspices). Despite Spalding's relationship with Sheffield's populace being like that of an anthropologist to a remote tribe, Roberts at the time declined to reproach this as a revival of crisis criticism, perhaps fearing that his critical career was too heavily reliant on the perpetuation of customary refutation. As with Cork and Brighton, Spalding's motivation was clearly "the belief that the public, as a valid subculture, has a valid folk art which it creates and sustains but which is submerged and undervalued beneath the more sophisticated art strata that, with official backing, has tended to dominate the intelligentsia of the day."¹⁶

On taking over as director of Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries in April 1989, Spalding simply continued to map an anthropological model onto the civic art collection, while gaining greater publicity for himself. Following his inauguration, Glasgow's Great British Art Show was hurriedly conceived as a riposte to the 1990 British Art Show, organised by the South Bank Centre. Conveniently, the public row that took

place between Spalding and the South Bank Centre attracted more attention to Spalding's ideas than to his exhibition, (20,000 paying visitors, a typical week's non-paying attendance at Kelvingrove). His prompt endorsement of Beryl Cook and Peter Howson's paintings was essentially Neo-Classical, a reductivist search for a never-never land populated by picturesque clowns whose allegedly unaffected behaviour guaranteed that 'quality of life' was not distorted by the impact of culturalist civilisation.

Spalding's primitivist/crisis critical model has easily found a central niche in official Scottish culture, which has a long tradition of being unduly concerned with 'folk'. In the early 18th century, members of the Neo-Classical Society of Dilettante initially looked to ancient Greece for 'noble simplicity.' Genre painters soon turned to home-grown primitives, depicting mythical peasant folk who were said to have populated Scotland prior to the enclosure movement. The fashion for the genre paintings which drench the basement of the National Gallery of Scotland was nurtured by the main myth-makers of official Scottish cultural identity, Robbie Burns's *sonsie verse* and the 'imaginative reconstruction' of history found in Walter Scott's *tartan fantasias*.¹⁷ The nostalgic shortbread couture used to promote Edinburgh today is essentially no different from Spalding's anthropological obsession with Glaswegiana. Both animate myths of Scottishness for promotional ends; both construct a theatrical image of the people from Neo-Classical principles, and in their aim to de-historicise culture, push 'executive skills' to the forefront of cultural existence. The dramatised fantasy of the highland clans imposed long ago on Scotland by novelists and romantic tourists, has also become highly lucrative for artists and administrators who have successfully re-marketed the great tradition as nostalgia for the late 70s crisis mode:

"Fanciful combinations of warm, brooding heroin chic, and the mysterious, rugged qualities of Central-Belt housing-estates, and Tiswas are not merely pleasurable but come with a sublime sense of danger and excitement. Various camcorder activists will 'eat chips' like cultural constructs, providing a taster for the first ever deep fried subversive voice for those women exploited by installation artists for their own ends."¹⁸

Where populists such as Spalding are much maligned for adopting an unsophisticated style to reach an 'unsophisticated audience', many remain at liberty to cultivate the older ploy of presenting 'lack of sophistication' as desirable to sophisticated audiences. Will Scotland continue to be a victim of its own propaganda, its official culture an amateur theatrical production? Even if its entire populace comes to understand and accept the values upon which populist artists and arts administrators proceed to shape them, they can play no part in the creation of those values or the decisions that flow from them. Following devolution, the official culture might grow in strength as power is further devolved to the 'New' generation of Labour monetarists who have duped themselves into believing that it is Scottish Culture.

In a devolved Scotland, such greatly empowered cultural emassaries may be unable to achieve true productiveness, to break out of the vicious circle of their fate. If they fail to become agents of history for themselves, they will remain blissfully isolated from the historical conditions that have determined their destiny, their actions relating only to the promotional structures of the art world, which will therefore remain the very fabric of their perceived history. As strangers in a world we have not made, we will continually find that our world is made in their image: Pat Lally appears at civic building, there is a vast picture of a stocky grinning character attached to its facade. Can Scottish culture be regenerated if the ossified cliches that dominate it are merely ridiculed? 'Scottishness' has already faced numerous forms of aesthetic de-legitimation. Attempts to redress the myths of official Scottish culture are inexorably pervaded with its romanticism, transfixed as they are by a culture they imagine they can successfully overmaster simply by

unmasking it. Often enough, the urge to unmask the duplicitous kilted culture is itself a mask for an urge to partake, to enjoy the apparent rewards it pretends to despise by further hypnotising an already bored and hypnotised audience. Since mystification is inevitably entailed by cultural practice, gestures opposed to official Scottish culture must rest parallel to its surface, and therefore cannot be produced through the fissures that they are often imagined to inhabit. Whether conscious or not, the objective will always be to preserve a model of a culture that is never more than the sum of its parts, to accept these rules in order to play the militant dilettante.

Notes

1. Nicholas Fairbairn, "Prostitution", *Daily Telegraph*, October 19th 1976. Reprinted in Caroline Tisdall, "Art Controversies of the Seventies", *British Art in the 20th Century*, Royal Academy, p85.
2. Director General Roy Shaw, on the other hand, later condemned the exhibition: "It is my personal view that this is not the kind of thing which public money should be used for". Roy Shaw in Richard Cork "Richard Cork's 1976 Art Review", *Evening Standard*, 30th December 1976.
3. Briony Fer, "The modern in fragments", *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, Yale University Press, 1993, p43.
4. T. J. Clark, "Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of Olympia in 1865", *Screen*, Spring 1980, p27.
5. As a barometer of British aesthetics in 1978 see Roger Taylor, *Art: an Enemy of the People*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, and Sue Braden, *Artists and People*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, both of whom elaborate the view that art is a partisan concept distinguished by certain associations which link it irrevocably with the middle classes.
6. Richard Cork, 'Art and Social Purpose', *Studio International*, 1976.
7. Art & Language, "Art for Society?", *Art-Language* Vol.4 No.4, June 1980. It remains to be seen how far Art & Language's 'Black Propaganda' (c.1978) differed from the critics and artists they disparaged, given that they also made their cultural capital out of the rise of crisis criticism.
8. Charles Harrison & Fred Orton, *A Provisional History of Art & Language*, Editions E. Fabre, Paris, April 1982, p61.
9. Conrad Atkinson, "Correspondence: 'Lives' Lives", *Art Monthly*, No. 27, 1979, p28.
10. Andrew Brighton, interview with Adrian Searle, Review: "Towards Another Picture", *Artscribe* No. 10, January 1978, p48.
11. Andrew Brighton replies to John McEwen, *Art Monthly* No. 16, 1978, p20.
12. Andrew Brighton, "Artnotes", *Art Monthly*, No. 15, 1978, p32.
13. Julian Spalding, "Withdrawal of Government Support for the Arts", *Art Monthly*, No.26, 1979, p24.
14. Julian Spalding, "The Forgotten Fifties", *The Forgotten Fifties*, Mappin Gallery, Sheffield, 1984, p6.
15. John Roberts, "The Forgotten Fifties", *Art Monthly*, No. 77, June 1984, p16.
16. David Sweet, "Artists v. The Rest: The New Philistines", *Artscribe* 11, April 1978, p38.
17. See *The Lamp of Memory: Scott and the Artist*, Buxton Museum and Art Gallery, July 30—August 25, 1979.
18. Prof. Plum, "Exhibition Information", *The City is No Longer Safe*, Largs Central Institution of Contemporary Cultural Productions and Non-Psychic Arse for the Encouragement of Active Nihilism and/or Critical Consumption, June—July 1997; a themed exhibition from the Auditorium for Critical Attitudes to Self-identification with the Definition 'Cultural Producer' as a Sufficient Response to Cultural Issues, near Stirling.