



THE HI~ARTS VIRTUAL DINNER PARTY, MAY 2008

“Artists are doing it for themselves”

Robert Livingston, Director of HI~Arts, and joint host of the dinner party with Dr Sheila Lodge, Dean of Arts and Humanities at UHI, offered the following *hors d’oeuvres*:

It certainly seems as if they are! Between 1999 and 2008 the number of galleries listed in the HI~Arts Gallery Guide doubled, and now stands at more than 180. In the last few years we’ve seen new and active artists’ groups springing up all over the place—Argyll, Shetland, Sutherland, Moray, Orkney—and the biggest of these, Highland Open Studios, has over 100 members. Every year HI~Arts’ Small Awards scheme for visual artists is over-subscribed—which means we’re making at least 16 such awards each year. At the last HI~Arts Visual Arts Gathering in Ullapool, in November 2006, over 100 delegates attended each of the two days.

Moray College is now Scotland’s fifth art school, with approval of its four-year degree course. Of just 48 Foundation clients of the Scottish Arts Council in the whole of Scotland, five are visual arts organisations in the Highlands and Islands—An Tobar in Mull, Taigh Chearsabhagh in North Uist, An Lanntair in Stornoway, the Pier Arts Centre in Orkney, and Shetland Arts (which runs the Bonhoga Gallery).

Inverness is in the middle of an unprecedented Public Art programme, with major projects that include the rebuilt Eden Court Theatre, the new Centre for Health Sciences, the refurbished Ness Islands park, and the streetscape of the Old Town.

New opportunities are opening up with major agencies like Forestry Commission Scotland becoming involved in large scale Visual Arts projects, from *Aig an Oir*, which linked local artists with the national Society of Wildlife Artists, to their involvement in the site specific projects *Between Two Worlds* in Glenmore and *Half Life* in Kilmartin Glen.

So, is it all good news? Are more artists settling in the Highlands and Islands, and if so, why? Is it really possible to make a living working as an artist here? What compromises have to be made? What obstacles need to be overcome?

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Dear Host and fellow guests,
glad to be sitting at the table with you all:
An introduction for you -

Fred Black;
over 50;
own and run the Inchmore Gallery;
not an artist;

I spent my early years convinced that my mum and dad were the real Super Woman and Super Man and one day they would tell me;
at the age of eight I understood and fell in love with the work of Klee;
I appreciate all things visually stimulating;
I believe in informed opinions;
I am a long term subscriber to Private Eye;
Therefore I am a cynic (polite I hope);...born out of experience they say!

Gwen and I are here in the Highlands, so for us I would say "yes" to the Highlands attracting artists - but also many, many other small cottage businesses and self employed folks, who recognise the Highlands and Islands as one of the last bastions of the UK where a certain solitude and being the author of your own destiny is (nearly) allowed.

Particularly for artists, however, the above - as in most areas of a "free" society - is only possible where previous income/financial security has allowed a relatively comfortable move to this Region.

The distinction of "making a living as an artist" should initially be defined - as to where you land in the scale of - "Vocational" or "I moved into the Highlands with some money and want to pick up my art again".

A truly vocational artistic life is very rare and is accepted as an ideal.

Yes it is possible to make a living as an artist - Being good at what you do; Having diversification with your skills; Your existing financial position; Who you know (your social group); Even thinking about compromising your artistic integrity (and be honest about that!). All help to make a living as an artist possible.

But of course not all artists have the skills to balance/manage the above, so then we have to have the debate on support advice - individual/networks.

Fred

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I am Simon Fildes a media artist, a parttime researcher lecturer at the School of Media arts and imaging University of Dundee, the co-director of a small arts and video production company and parent of 2 small children with Katrina McPherson

what we've been doing? well I'll leave that to you to have a look.

www.go-at.co.uk
www.left-luggage.co.uk
www.move-me.com
www.hyperchoreography.org
www.videodance.org.uk
www.screendance.org
www.makingvideodance.com
www.girlband.org.uk
www.zillij.org.uk
www.imaging.dundee.ac.uk

I would really like to know more about the fellow guests here.

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Hello from Shetland - as it's a dinner party, i thought i should start with an appetiser –

"I look at appetizers as a proving ground for creative ideas"
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3067/is_200110/ai_n7705562)

Hi, I'm **Clair Aldington, the visual arts development officer for Shetland Arts** where I started working last November, so I am still settling into living and working in the highlands and islands, having moved up here from the south of england. In response to Robert's appetiser.....it's great to meet you all around this virtual table and to take part in a topical discussion – one which I've often heard discussed in the short time i've been at shetland arts.

Shetland is the furthest north you can go in the uk, getting here and leaving here is expensive, cost of living is high, yet artists and creative people are attracted to live and work here, and not only in the major centre of Lerwick. From my limited observation of only having been here for 6 months, the majority of artists seem to be attracted to living in some of the remotest parts



of shetland, in the outlying islands and tiny habitations. I find this really interesting, yet it doesn't completely surprise me. Speaking as a visual artist, sometimes my greatest creativity has stemmed from the most difficult places, the places on the edge, and I think that's maybe why more artists are being attracted to working in places like the highlands and islands and away from major population centres. The islands, particularly, increase that feeling of being on the edge as you are constantly aware of being where the sea meets the land, and the interface between water and earth.

I also think the increase in computer technology and the internet, etc., has made it even more possible for artists to live and work in remoter places and still be as much in contact with the world as if they were based in more urban environments.

What do you think?

Clair

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Hello Fellow Guests

I have been away on holiday and then at the British Craft Trade Fair at Harrogate until an hour ago and so am only just responding to our email conversation.

Let me introduce myself (in a nut-shell):

Denise Collins, Director/Owner of the Castle Gallery in Inverness (opened 2001).

B.A. Fine Art from Leeds University 1984 (one-time painter/photographer/etcher).

M.A. Museum and Gallery Administration from City University, London (full-time gallery administrator since 1986).

Family from Inverness. I moved up here from Cambridge in 2000 (I opened my previous gallery in Cambridge in 1991 and sold it 2 years ago).

2 young children in Gaelic Medium Education. I spend 2 days a week at Sabhal Mor Ostaig in Skye learning Gaelic.

I live on a boat and have a 1958 bantam motorbike (which I only use in the summer).



In Cambridge, I sold a lot of work from artists that I had sourced from Scotland, not because of any nationalistic tendencies, but because I liked the work. When I mentioned to some of these artists in 2000, that I was planning to open a contemporary art gallery in Inverness, they fell off their chairs laughing. They thought that Inverness was a cultural back-water and that I would not succeed. Happily for all of us, I have proved them wrong and am still selling their work (but in Inverness rather than Cambridge). In the last 7 years Inverness and the surrounding area has changed considerably, and the opening of many new galleries, many in redundant churches, proves that there is a vitality in the Highlands. However, compared to the south of England, it is hard work making a good living selling works of art locally. One of the reasons I moved north (and I suspect that it is the same reason that many artists have been doing the same) is for the better quality of life (money isn't everything).

I believe that this artistic vitality needs to be encouraged, nurtured and promoted. Obviously, many artists agree, as the setting up of open studio organisations proves... they are doing it for themselves! However, I am sure a bit of support from the public sector is welcomed, especially financial help to produce professional catalogues. Why was it then that some members of the Highland Open Studios felt let down by the organisers of Highland 2007 with the lower than hoped for level of financial assistance. Are the visual arts getting their fair share of the honey-pot? (is there anything left in the pot after the refurbishment of Eden Court?). Obviously, money isn't everything but it helps (!!).

The perceived remoteness of the Highlands can be a frustrating barrier to business. Delivery/collection of work is difficult and the extra amount that the courier companies charge for delivery to 'remote' places is frustrating. This is from the perspective of Inverness, and I know it is much, much worse in Shetland and the Outer Isles. Maybe, this is one reason that there are so many jewellers in Orkney and Shetland, as the work is easier to post?

Denise

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Hi everybody...sorry for turning up at the dinner party so late but I must rush off again immediately and will be out of email touch for a few days.

Rather than pause to eat and chat, I have grabbed a can of Irn Bru and a six pack of Tunnocks tea cakes to sustain me (I am inspired by my friend Mike



Small's attempt to live off local produce for a year, so I am trying to do the same). I will consume these in a layby on the A9.

You will find that in my haste I have left on my virtual chair a draft of a talk I am giving at An Lanntair on Saturday. I hope this may be useful background.

Murdo

Murdo MacDonald is Professor of History of Scottish Art at the University of Dundee and Principal Investigator on an AHRC funded collaboration between the Visual Research Centre at the University of Dundee and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic College in the Isle of Skye. Together they have embarked on a major five-year project which unites experts in contemporary art, Gaelic language and culture, and art history. The project, Window to the West - a title which refers to Sorley MacLean's poem Hallaig- explores the inter-relations of visual art and Gaelic language and culture, creating new opportunities for the understanding of Gaelic culture as a key to understanding Scotland.

Murdo's talk can be downloaded from <http://www.hi-arts.co.uk/Arts-Journal/WTTW%20RSA%20Gillies%20Lecture.pdf>

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Responding to what Denise said about moving north I would like to put our own story in that context because I think it's highly relevant to the discussion and the wider difficulties of being involved in contemporary arts practice in the highlands. I am going to do this without mentioning money as it's a given that nobody owes us a living.

I moved to Newtonmore from Edinburgh in 1999 as I was spending increasing amounts of weekends exploring the mountains and crags here, Katrina followed in 2001 moving from London where she was directing and producing for the BBC. This move was only possible for us with the increasing availability of cheaper high quality equipment. but crucially and this still is true today we already had a strong network of people in other parts of the country who wanted to commission us or work with us.

The first question I will put forward is, how is it possible to develop as an artist in the Highlands without having been somewhere else before? I accept that within the realms of music this may be different but within our practice of media based arts and broadcast production I still doubt this is possible. While



artists are doing it for themselves in the highlands we still rely on the leverage of institutions and organisations in urban centres (and right now we are also partly supported by Dundee University).

Today we live in an even more remote spot in Glenferness but broadband allows us to develop a strong network throughout the world. Last year we were presenting work in Buenos Aires and Den Haag. Next week we fly to Australia to present work, give talks- workshops and take part in international fora. We have rarely had this opportunity in the Highland region and those opportunities that have happened have often been organised by ourselves in the context of events that we helped set up where individuals from all over the UK and the world come to.

Of course this is exciting for us but we often wish for a bit more locally focussed possibilities for us to develop as artists and producers. However I can't see that the cultural landscape in the Highlands right now is in anyway fertile ground for us in this respect, though we will keep on feeding it and one day something may grow. We love living here but it is a life choice, a place to raise children and live in clean air and peace. I think we need to be clear that for most artists moving to this part of the world it is not necessarily a good career move let's face it.

So my second question which is supplementary to the first is what institutions and infrastructure will be required to nurture a home grown innovative, experimental and yes even avant-garde Highland artistic community that welcomes the world of contemporary practice across visual arts and performance that we see in places like the DCA, Threshold space, Fruitmarket, CCA, Peacock Visual Arts because right now I don't see it in Inverness. Maybe nobody wants it.

Simon

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In response to Simon' s final point... do people in Inverness want 'innovative, experimental and yes even avant-garde ' visual and performing arts. I think the answer is no. There is just not the cultural diversity and awareness here, that you find in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen.

The old, defunct Art.tm was an attempt to introduce some exhibitions of this nature into the Highlands and it failed and lost a lot of the loyal customer base



that used to belong to the previous organisation, Highland Printmakers. OK, as a fine art trained graduate, I have a personal interest in this type of work but I do not think the Highlands are yet ready for it.

Therefore, the question is.. .should we try to 'educate the masses' (sorry for this glib phrase) in contemporary thought or should we concentrate on nurturing what has already been established here at grass-roots level? You can do both, but there needs to be a primary strategy.

Denise

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The table talk's off to a good start, as we're already talking about:

Do we need to change;

How and should we change;

Who should we attempt to change;

Can we afford to change;

What level of the Arts are we referring to;

I think we can debate this for a long time and until we are all agreeing in some form or other.

However, the most important and ultimate answer we should be pursuing is "Who is then going to listen?"....that comes after "who should be and who will be and who won't be!!".

We know who should be listening....but if all we do is promote singular "Highland Arts" events (as opposed to creating a sustainable Arts infrastructure), then off will trot our good artists down south again....and back they'll come in a few years, with a few pounds, settle down and then sit and talk about this same subject over dinner with some friends!

To change the, sometimes, twee and cheap perception of Highland arts, we have to be able to sustain a choice of venues and "public entertainment" which includes the taste of "cosmopolitan arts" - (and yes, I do believe we have one or two venues who are doing a reasonable job and taking commercial risks in an attempt to elevate the profile of the Arts here, and I do believe the Highlands is getting a little bit more cosmopolitan in outlook and should be are "ready" to sample a bit more "risky" Arts.....I said a BIT).



But we should remember, Denise described an example of what happens when there is little infrastructure of support, coupled with perhaps aspirational leadership - which leads to her last words of "primary strategy".

I think we could do worse than stop and look at what the Ullapool area has done (and nearly did) - with and for the visual and performing arts - led by practitioners who are forward thinking, good at what they do, by people who were well positioned to exert influence - and it all revolved around building a sustainable environment, which would not only involve localised teaching/training/performance and commercial output but would also attract income in the same areas.

The above sounded ok in my head!

Fred

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Hello everyone,

Please accept my (way beyond fashionably) late entrance to the party, due to the Easter holidays.

My name is **Gina Wall and I am the Programme Leader for the BA (Hons) Fine Art at Moray School of Art, part of Moray College, an Academic Partner in the UHI Millennium Institute, the university in waiting for the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.** We have been running an ordinary degree course here in Elgin for 7 years and this is our first year of Honours level delivery. In 2003/04 we joined in partnership with Lews Castle College who deliver Levels 1 and 2 of the degree from Taigh Chearsabhagh in Lochmaddy, on the island of North Uist. If any of you are interested in finding out more about our course, please do not hesitate to ask, but I thought it might be prudent given the timescale that I contribute something other than background information.

In response to Denise's 'primary strategy' question, I think that 'grassroots nurture' and playing the long game is realistic if we are talking from a pan-Highlands perspective. The thing about the avant garde is that nobody should be ready for it. It is by its very nature something that is pioneering and therefore uncomfortable. I do not think that there will ever be a point where the general public actually asks for something like this, therefore it is up to us



all (in some capacity or other) to lead on smaller developments which will then grow into something bigger.

I do not know much about the history of the move from Highland Printmakers to Art.tm but I wonder if (from Denise's description of events) the problem was the unsuccessful attempt to re-brand an organisation that people were already happy with, rather than this being a real indicator of the need for a certain kind of art experience.

I think that the core of the issue is how we perceive and present ourselves as creative inhabitants of the H&I. The difficult dichotomy here is that to a certain extent we do have to educate from within our communities whilst preserving our right to kick against that which we see around us: we do not have an established sub-culture which we can inhabit. Indeed we could ask, is there a critical mass from which to form such a sub-culture? How do we resolve this conundrum of working within and outside at the same time?

I believe that we need the following:

- small/modest highly specialised units which coalesce over time to form powerful bodies
- networking/team working
- infiltration of/representation on local decision making bodies
- education (education, education) based on quality which not only serves the needs of our community but brings about a set of changing needs
- strong leadership and the self-confidence to voice support political, experimental and sometimes controversial work (as well as aesthetic practice)

Please feel free to disagree with me entirely!

Would someone pass the salt please?

Gina

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From my perspective, Art.tm was pretty much a cupboard and was not a contemporary art venue that relates well to the aspirations of a modern city, it was tokenistic and would never have been able to host truly ambitious and world class contemporary art. 'The passing' by Bill Viola? hmm I don't think



so no way. I'm sad that it went but agree it probably never should have even happened.

Art.tn also suffered from the kind of anti intellectual sniping that we've come to expect from the tabloid press and the small minded views of the elected and self selected section of the great and the good of the area who seem to have more desire to sustain a low wage tourist based economy than feeding peoples minds. Why do the more remote island galleries do better? I wish I could go and see them more often

One of the problems for me with the Highlands arts and cultural scene is the that since moving here it's like Duchamp never existed, Kandinsky and Beuys completely irrelevant, Koons erased, I could go on but I'm sure you get the picture.

I look back at some examples of what inspired me and got me interested in contemporary visual arts and for sure it wasn't my art teacher.

The Rothko room in the Tate was a mind blowing experience for me at 21. Of course I'd seen pictures but nothing prepares you for the physical and mental intensity of that place. I was never the same again.

A Joseph Beuys exhibition at the old Richard Demarco's gallery pointed me to him lecturing a dead hare on art and his work with wax batteries. My eyes opened. These things happened because I was there. The young Simon Fildes transformed forever by the products of profound and philosophical creative endeavour.

I did a residency recently with young people who had never heard of Kandinsky which was a bit soul destroying as my whole plan was to build a project on one of his essays! anyway we went on a journey with this together and nobody said to me we're not ready for this yet Simon come back in a few years time and maybe we'll have matured a bit to deal with this. I've never accepted this argument and never will.

Art changes lives I've seen it, I've been involved in it. Through art I've seen people move away from crime, move away from self destruction, haul themselves out of ignorance and poverty and change others lives as well. Healing and transforming and challenging and voice giving. To say that humans are not ready for Art is to give up and say they are dead to the wondrous possibilities of the sublime.



Do we really need to talk of primary strategies at this dinner party? after all it's just us isn't it?

Simon

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Something I said when I was in Stornoway on Saturday seems to bear on this debate. I was talking about Finlay Macleod and Mary Smith's advocacy of the self taught painter Angus Morrison, who died in the 1940s.

'It is, I think, timely to be reminded that visual art is something like making boats or songs, something that we human beings are inclined to do. The German artist Josef Beuys, who contributed a major European dimension to the development of Highland art in the 1970s, used to say that everyone is an artist. What he meant was that the impulse to art is part of the human condition. There could be few better demonstrations of that than the paintings of Angus Morrison.'

Beuys would have had no problem with Morrison, nor Morrison with Beuys. The idea that a place is or isn't 'ready' for contemporary art strikes me as strange.

Murdo

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Perhaps thinking about this from the point of view of whether or not the general populace is ready for progressive contemporary art takes the conversation down a less productive route.

The guests at this virtual table are not the people who require to be convinced of the need, or entitlement to engagement with visual culture. So how do areas which are less well resourced in terms of access to art centres (i.e. Moray-which has no publicly funded art centre), learn from areas which seem to be thriving, in spite of their rurality/remoteness?

How do we counteract what Simon was talking about with regard to the fate of Art.tn i.e. the 'anti intellectual sniping' which seems to imply that there is a perception that access to quality contemporary visual practice is somehow inconsistent with a tourist based economy? Surely the experiences of our



island communities and places like Dundee prove that this perception is completely wrong.

I don't know if we need to talk about primary strategies but we do need to make sure our time at the table is as productive as possible.

Looking forward to hearing about your experiences.

Gina

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Sorry to appear unproductive. I was definitely responding to Robert's positive slant on the current state of 'things' in the Highlands and in particular his final questions.

So, is it all good news? Are more artists settling in the Highlands and Islands, and if so, why? Is it really possible to make a living working as an artist here? What compromises have to be made? What obstacles need to be overcome?

I will wait for other guest responses before I comment further as I don't want to appear to dominate the proceedings and apologies to all, I have to finish this meal as I have to leave on Friday.

Simon

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There does need to be a **primary strategy** for the visual arts in the H&I because there is nothing worse than people constantly debating/talking/exchanging ideas if no **practical recommendations** come from this, and if the recommendations are not **implemented**.

The visual arts community needs to focus on a way forward and plan its route. Practically, there is not enough funding to satisfy all interests, therefore **choices** have to be made and a primary strategy agreed.

My way of looking at it is this:

Artists of all types are moving into the area and are starting to create **critical masses** (i.e. artists' open studio organisations, Highland Artists group, a new network of small commercial galleries...) This **grass-roots energy** needs to



be harnessed and enhanced with the help of **public sector funding and strategic planning**. Through **community involvement and education**, general **public awareness** of the visual arts will rise and lead to further support, maybe to the extent that the elected councillors of the Highland Council will give serious money to visual arts projects (rather than cutting provision for visiting artists in schools and community arts workers, which they are doing right now).

The **immediate / medium term future for the visual arts** in the H&I, given limited resources, does not need a contemporary art centre in Inverness, the like of D.C.A., C.C.A. etc (or even I.M.A.G. in a posh new building somewhere). What does it need? **Opportunities for those people already involved as active creators** to network and exchange ideas in a way that overcomes the geographical difficulties of the area (more virtual dinner parties, conferences, opportunities for professional development and bursaries). This should involve 'conventional artists', 'avant-garde' artists and all shades inbetween.

Gina is right to raise the point about the **self perception** and presentation of the visual artists in the Highlands. This H&I are a unique geographical and cultural area (quite unlike Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee) and so we should be focussing on our strengths, we should be **promoting our own unique perspectives** and not be afraid to say that 'avant-garde' institutionalised exhibition spaces are not right for us (not just now, anyway). We are not cultural morons. (Am I sounding a little reactionary ... good !!).

I am not suggesting that the H&I should never engage with the avant-garde, but that it is pointless to try and promote it out of context, without previously **creating an infra-structure for the visual arts through education and led from the grass-roots level** (rather than being parachuted in from outside).

One of the reasons that Taigh Chearsabhagh, An Lanntair, Pier and Bonhoga are successful is that they are based around **local community involvement**. This is something which is currently lacking with the Inverness Art Gallery but is being developed by the Highland Print Studio, in my opinion.

These are my opinions, from the perspective of someone working within the commercial sector of the visual arts in the H&I. However, I am willing to listen to anyone who would like to put forward counter arguments (if you are



not all already too stuffed with information, ideas and other peoples opinions!).

Denise

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Dear fellow guests,

I will be leaving work - and the virtual world - behind for the weekend so I will say my goodbyes and thank you for your company and for your thoughts.

Not that I'm trying to have the last word whilst lurking at the door, but:

I do agree with much of what Denise had to say in her last email. However, I don't agree with the fact that we don't need a contemporary art centre in the Inverness area. We have the entitlement to such a facility but I agree that the timescale for this does not fall in the short to medium term. But it needs to be on the agenda now for delivery in the long term and as Denise so rightly points out, this will only happen through direct community involvement, also partnership working, and strong civic leadership.

So, thanks again.

Gina

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Well, the table's cleared, the last coffees have been drunk, and already there's a hint of dawn in the night sky.

I hope that everyone has enjoyed their virtual repast, and has had a chance to have their say. We may not have solved everything, but I think there are some good solid pointers to the way forward in what everyone has said. I'm sure the debate will continue at the Gathering on 15/16 May.

My warmest thanks for coming to the party, and all the best till the next time.

Robert