

NARRATIVES UNFOLDING

NATIONAL ART HISTORIES IN AN UNFINISHED WORLD

Edited by MARTHA LANGFORD

Dalriada, the Lordship of the Isles, and the Northern Rim

*Decentralizing the Visual Culture of the
Highlands and Islands of Scotland*

LINDSAY BLAIR

The variegated nature of the country has been noted by travellers to Scotland from earliest times, and it is quite natural that these geographical differences be reflected in the culture as well. The Highlands of Scotland has a distinct cultural history (and language) and significant parts of this history are its links with Ireland and a determination to look outward to the sea and beyond for inspiration. The Highlands has also attracted travellers from other lands – for many reasons – but from the time of St Columba's arrival in the sixth century, people have come particularly to find a sense of the spiritual, or the revelatory. With this attraction in mind, I focus in this chapter on the significant contributions that a few individuals have made to the development of contemporary art in the Highlands. These individuals brought with them traces of languages from other art worlds – from the abstract expressionism of the 1950s as represented by American Jon Schueler (1916–1992), through the conceptual performance art in the 1970s as represented by German artist Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), to the experimental video and installation art of the 1980s as represented by American Daniel Reeves (b. 1948). I want to suggest that these incursions have allowed for several distinctive lines of discovery in the region. The emergence of radical counter-narratives from an indigenous satirical tradition, as well as innovative research and commissioning of socially engaged creative projects in combination with these international incursions, has enabled the people of the Highlands to enter into a renewed dialogue with their histories.

My first study of this phenomenon drew upon the conceptual vocabulary of Gilles Deleuze;¹ this research has now taken another turn toward a contemporary mapping of visual art in the Highlands. Beginning with a brief geopolitical

number of “travellers” – artists who came to the Highlands and established their practices there, as well as significant visitors who manifested the importance of place, incorporating the history and mythology of the Highlands into their work. This new orientation addresses the potential for a genuinely transnational identity in a postcolonial situation: a thrust toward decentralization can be seen to coincide with the stirrings of cultural renewal through the establishment of connections with a range of international aesthetics.

The *Scottish National Dictionary* describes the Highlands of Scotland as “the mountainous district of Scotland lying north and west of a line drawn approximately from Dumbarton to Ballater and thence to Nairn, and enclosing the territory formerly occupied by the clans and speaking the Gaelic language.”² The geography of the area, as well as the language, distinguishes it from the rest of Scotland. Scotland’s place within the Union with England changed dramatically after the Union of the Parliaments in 1707: Scotland increasingly became a colony of its much larger and more powerful neighbour, especially within the hegemony of the British Empire. The Highlands of Scotland changed in a very particular way after Charles Edward Stuart’s defeat at Culloden in 1746. Before this time, the system of clanship placed the clan chief and his clan in a relationship of trust and mutual dependency quite unlike any other sector of society in the British Isles. After 1746, as the Highland landlords increasingly looked to the South for models of behaviour, the relationship between the clan chief and the clan changed irrevocably. Historian James Hunter states the case with startling clarity: “The transformation of clan chiefs from essentially tribal leaders into cash-obsessed owners of commercially organized estates was ‘the great fact’ of Modern Highland history.”³ While recent histories have drawn attention to the fact that Clearances took place in the Lowlands as well as in the Highlands of Scotland, most would agree that the Highlands of Scotland has a distinctive historical as well as geographical identity. The art of the Scottish Highlands, however, has not generally been viewed as possessing the distinctive cultural characteristics of its literature or its music. The art has been doubly circumscribed: first, by its peripheral relation to Holyrood and second, through Scotland’s peripheral relation to Westminster. It is typically included as a sub-section in overviews of Scottish art. Only in recent times has Highland art been recognized as a subject requiring a discrete historiography of its own.

Toward a Highland Art History

The first major advance came from the Outer Hebrides: An Lanntair Art Centre in Stornoway. A farsighted exhibition and publication, *As An Fhearann* (1986),

brought together a wealth of visual material from newspapers, documentaries, art photographs, postcards, and paintings.⁴ Polemical essays by poet Sorley MacLean and playwright John McGrath politicized the project by revealing the narrow, distorted, and stultifying nature of the visual representation of the Highlands. The exhibition brought to light a vast archive of visual signifiers that had created a mythical region inhabited by cartoon character types and all manner of “othernesses” for a centralized consciousness to gawp at: photographs, postcards, film, television programs, and illustrated magazine articles were gathered as evidence; it disclosed the Highland culture that had been concealed beneath the signification of a dominant colonial neighbour. Alexander Moffat’s essay “Beyond the Highland Landscape,” also in the *As an Fhearann* publication, highlighted the deficiencies of the Highland art tradition: “The vast majority of paintings about the Scottish Highlands conform to a certain type. These paintings can generally be called Romantic in conception and depict natural phenomena such as rugged mountains, misty glens, and remote lochs ... Alongside the romantic associations of Highland landscape has grown a comical view of the way of life of the Highlands, with grouse shooting, bagpipes, and clan gatherings.”⁵ Moffat finishes his summation with a forceful rhetorical question: “But what if we look beyond this façade at the complex social realities of the real Highlands and ask if this has been a suitable subject for art and artists. Has an image of the people of the Highlands emerged since the passing of the Crofting Act in 1886?”⁶ *As An Fhearann* was followed by a series of equally adroit exhibitions which would include a significant political perspective, including *Calanais* (1995) and *MacTotem* (1998).⁷

As far back as 1986, Moffat had identified the crucial role that artist Will Maclean (b. 1941), who featured in *As An Fhearann*, was playing in respect of developing a sophisticated and contemporary imagery to address the political and social complexities in the Highlands: “the most meaningful and sustained body of work on the theme of Highland life, both past and present, by an artist living and working today is by Will Maclean.”⁸ Maclean is known primarily for his boxes, sculptural assemblages or light relief works, intricately crafted pieces that have earned him recognition as one of Scotland’s most significant contemporary artists. Maclean’s actual experience as a fisherman, in the tradition of his mother’s folk from Skye and his father’s sea-faring ancestors from Coigach, proved crucial to his development as a maker.⁹ As his art developed so did his range of references – to whaling, to Atlantic voyages of exploration to the Inuit people of North America – but always with empathy for the peoples whose very survival depended on the dangerous and often tragic encounter with the sea. Later in this chapter, when we move to one of the sculptural cairns on the Isle of Lewis by Maclean in collaboration with Marian Leven, *An Sùileachan* (2014), we will see how these political complexities remain in his artwork.

In 2002 Malcolm Maclean and Theo Dorgan commissioned a hundred artists to respond creatively to a hundred Gaelic poems from the Scots and Irish traditions. Calligraphers worked with the artists to integrate key lines of poetry into the artworks in their great Gaelic enterprise: *An Leabhar Mòr*. This was a major book and exhibition which aimed to renew the links between Gaelic Scotland and Ireland. While Duncan MacMillan's essay does connect the book to European Modernism, it only fully comes to life when he connects the project back to the *Book of Kells* (ca. AD 800) and a tradition of illumination: "In the early medieval period, as the carved stones and crosses of Scotland and Ireland and the illuminated books whose forms they echo bear elaborate witness, the Celtic world had a visual tradition that was second to none."¹⁰

Another important publication, *Arts of Resistance* (2008), by Alexander Moffat and Alan Riach, is subtitled *Poets, Portraits and Landscapes of Modern Scotland* and this links to *An Leabhar Mòr* with an emphasis on the poetry/painting connection. Moffat and Riach relate developments in modern Scottish culture to the Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s led by Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978).¹¹ The second part of the book is devoted to the Highlands; it moves from Romanticism to landscape painter William McTaggart (1835–1910), then on to David Forrester Wilson (1873–1950), Polish émigré Josef Herman (1911–2000), and finally to American Paul Strand (1890–1976) and from there to the poets. This appreciation of the culture reveals something of its rich transnational diversity, but the language used throughout fails to connect it to a wider conversation. The book openly declares itself to be anti-theoretical.¹²

Murdo Macdonald's essay "Gàidhealtachd Art: Historical and Contemporary" (2013) sets out a crucial problem for Highland art: "although Scottish Gaelic has given rise to one of the great oral, literary and musical cultures to the world, the visual aspect of Scottish Gaelic culture has received relatively little attention."¹³ Macdonald seeks an authenticity within the visual tradition to equal or even rival that which is widely acknowledged within the literary and song tradition. In his thesis, the outlining of a new visual history of Highland art should link the visual to the poetic, to the literary, to the song tradition, to the McTaggart line: "if anyone has a claim to the title of founder of modern painting in Scotland it is McTaggart."¹⁴ The demand for the authentic is articulated in Macdonald's insistence on the link between art and the Gaelic language: "Our contemporary artist should be able to speak or in some way engage with the language."¹⁵ Macdonald's objective is to recover something of the authentic – to rescue that element which is peculiar to Highland culture from the scourge of colonization. This is a search for essentialism.

Historian Neal Ascherson has written of the seductive power that this image of an authentic past continues to wield within the Scottish psyche when he says: "the Gaelic-speaking society disintegrated by the Clearances was a model

for how human beings can live well together in community. In what survives of that society, Scotland seeks to find its own image.”¹⁶ As with Macdonald, what is still sought is the sense of the national rather than the transnational: the sense of being, rather than “becoming.” The art histories I have mentioned all have one thing in common, which is the search for the authentic, or the tree of belonging.¹⁷ This quest for authenticity, an archeological practice now largely abandoned by the discipline, has been beautifully satirized by Ascherson in his anecdote of the axe: “This is my grandfather’s axe. My father gave it a new handle, and I gave it a new head.”¹⁸

An explanation for the Scottish desire for authenticity has been provided in *Scottish Photography: A History* (2007) by art historian Tom Normand, who shows that, as Scotland industrialized so quickly in the nineteenth century, photographers were offering “consolation” in proffering images of a harmonious Highland (and Scottish) rural arcadia.¹⁹ In other words, the notion of timelessness – in places like Newhaven and St Andrews – suggests a community that continues in harmony despite the industrial changes taking place in the country at large. In the photographs Normand discusses, we see different generations, in collective endeavours, or at rest, apparently oblivious and impervious to change. These images are essentially compensatory images to provide an escape from reality. People saw these as authentic – this was a wish fulfillment, because from the outset they are nostalgic and idealized, existing as residual images on the fringes of industrialization.

While a desire for the authentic is totally understandable as a reaction to colonialism, it does not allow for a “minoritarian” Scottish culture to become part of a larger conversation.²⁰ I focus on what has been brought into the Highlands by artists with completely different perspectives who are not part of any colonialist relationship with the area but who have immeasurably broadened the vocabulary of signifiers available to Highland artists today. But, given the force of tradition, the question is: how to write such a narrative?

Anne MacLeod’s major scholarly study, *From an Antique Land: Visual Representations of the Highlands and Islands 1700–1880* (2012), shifts outdated notions and begins the process of opening up the territory to alternative ways of seeing. MacLeod investigates a wide and diverse range of signifiers in the visualization of the Highlands toward the end of the early modern period. Showing how far the discourse has advanced since 1986, MacLeod expresses her determination to understand the forces underlying historical or cultural effects:

It is well known that images of the Highlands and Islands dominate popular concepts of Scottishness. Castles and clans, tartan, bagpipes, whisky, bens and glens, and mountain torrents, stags at bay, heather and

hairy cattle: all have a well-established place in the visual canon. This is old news. What is less well understood is the process through which such stereotypes were forged and sustained.²¹

MacLeod goes on to trace a complex and variegated history of representation that is essentially dominated by a preservationist ideology from the classical to the geological, from the advance of empiricism to the grand Highland tour. The concluding chapter of her exhaustive study of visual representations articulates the problem for the would-be authenticist:

Discussing modern Gaelic poetry, Malcolm Chapman has addressed the problem of distinguishing between a self-representation which is true to its source and one which is influenced by the majority culture. According to him: "The appropriation of Gaelic culture has had such manifold effects upon the relationships between Gael and Gall over the last two hundred years that to sort out a simple truth or an unambiguous stance is perhaps impossible."²²

MacLeod's study separates the Highlands from the general overview of Scottish art – avoiding any sense of connoisseurship or elitism, it moves far beyond the canon or tree structure to interrogate concepts such as nature, pedigree, origins, and authenticity, while operating within the tradition of deduction supported by empirical evidence.²³

MacLeod refers to another study of photographers of the Highlands, *Photographers of the Western Isles* by Martin Padget (2010). This book draws attention to the Americans Margaret Fay Shaw (1903–2004) and Paul Strand, and the German Werner Kissling (1895–1988), who brought distinctive international "lenses" to the imagery of the Highlands. Other photographic historians are participating in the same project of reappraisal, showing how photography has constructed our perception of the world.²⁴ These transnational cultural studies have begun to clear the path.

Rewriting and Reimagining Highland History

The rewriting of Highland history has been crucial to the advance of its visual history. James Hunter brought about a momentous shift with his *The Making of the Crofting Community* (1976). This study was based on sources oftentimes ignored by historians – Gaelic songs and poetry, testimony given by crofters to royal commissions and tribunals, newspaper accounts of speeches made at crofters' meetings, and the letters sent by crofters to politicians and civil

servants. It represents a remarkable example of “a history-from-below,” a reaction to the traditional historian’s counsel for Landlord Defense in relation to the Highland Clearances.²⁵ Just how much of a departure from what had gone on before is intimated by Hunter: “I take comfort ... from the fact that thinking of the kind which underpins *The Making of the Crofting Community* has been reinforced recently, at the international level if not yet at the Scottish one, by innovative developments in history writing. Those developments have begun to impact, with fascinating results, on Ireland ... And despite the parochialism in which academic historians of Scotland – a singularly isolationist breed – have always wallowed, the new ideas which historians elsewhere have started to embrace will eventually impact on historical studies here also.”²⁶ Significant progress has been made since the publications of Hunter, and when it is linked to the work of Andy Wightman, an alternative history begins to emerge.²⁷

The rewriting of history, as in Hunter’s approach, while absolutely necessary, is not entirely unproblematic. The encryption of place as embodiment of dispossession and exile has created an iconography of the Highlands that has a vast geographical and emotional reach. While Hunter’s work has been so vital in the rewriting of history, this vision of the past into clearly defined oppositional entities can all too readily reinforce the mythical fixities so familiar in the cultural landscape of Scotland – the landowner and the dispossessed; ruthless lairds and crofter victims; heroes (precious few), and villains. However, we do see in Hunter’s work the sense that there is a vision within Highland history that is different from that within Scotland as a whole – a vision that resists centralizing tendencies and rather relishes the intersections/crossings and communications that it fosters from its geographical location on the Western seaboard. Historic links can be traced back to the ancient kingdom of Dalriada, which essentially combined South Western Scotland (mainland Argyll and the Inner Isles) with the North of Ireland (especially the Glens of Antrim). These early bonds between Ireland and Scotland would be renewed and strengthened by the immensely powerful Lordship of the Isles from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Gaelic scholar Calum Maclean describes the principal characteristic of the Lordship as “a veritable Kingdom within a Kingdom and a continual threat to central authority for over a century and a half ... The fundamental difference between the principality of the Isles and the Scottish Court was that the Lords of the Isles were Gaelic and the Court to a large extent Anglo-Norman in tradition and no longer Gaelic ... The Lords of the Isles had their own legal system and administration, and in reality they were in closer cultural contact with their kindred in Ireland than with the Lowlanders of Scotland.”²⁸ In recent times the Columba Initiative (1997) has set about re-invigorating the links between Scotland and Ireland and their united



8.1 Calum Colvin,
Vestiarium Scoticum II,
 2005. Digital photo-
 montage, 58 × 51 cm.
 Courtesy of the artist.

Gaelic cultural heritage.²⁹ We are seeing elements of that outward-looking, decentralizing propensity which suggest that the Gàidhealtachd may yet again prove fertile ground for alternative ways of thinking, seeing, and art-making.

Some of the most innovative developments in contemporary Scottish art have come from the deconstruction of the binaries which remain deeply entrenched within the popular imagination: Highland/Lowland; Jacobite/Hanoverian; Gaelic/English; real/artificial; mythical/empirical. These have come from widely divergent directions: for example, from Highland artist Charles Avery (b. 1973), with his exercises in the Rabelaisian grotesque. Avery's vast and comprehensive installations, all based on the "mythologies" of an imaginary island, raise philosophical conundrums at the same time as they reference the island of Mull just off the coast of Argyll in the Highlands. Avery assaults

the stereotypes of islanders propagated through popular histories, fictions, and travellers' tales in his great sprawling Swiftian satire. Calum Colvin (b. 1961) rethinks and consistently reworks the iconography of Balmoralism in his multi-layered theatrical assemblages. He disentangles familiar Highland icons from their normal space, creating unexpected signification in a reconstructed universe of artifice, and in so doing lifts the Highland icons into the domain of the "uncanny." This is seen in the series *Vestiarium Scoticum* (2005) made from a series of montages of images taken at Culloden Battlefield Site (on the field and in the old Visitors Centre), a venison-processing factory in Sutherland, and a kilt shop in Edinburgh (Fig. 8.1).

Avery and Colvin use a complex and contemporary set of signifiers to undermine the stereotyped commodification of the imagery of the Highlands. This is the way that they address the appropriation of the real; they are all too aware of a world of simulacra against which their signifiers work as counter-narratives. Both artists have created microcosmic other worlds that satirize the commodified present. The vision that they share is deeply critical of society and its manipulative powers; it is skeptical, dark, and acerbic, finding echoes in the cut-and-paste worlds of European photomontage in the case of Colvin, and in the dark and grotesque political illustrations of Honoré Daumier (1808–1879), George Grosz (1893–1959), and Otto Dix (1891–1969), especially in Avery. Both artists, in other words, look back not to find an essentialism but to concentrate, in a postmodernist way, on the representation and ideologies that have determined our readings of history, some of which have been imported to the Highlands.

New Directions from Without

The individual artists who are the real focus of this chapter are not part of any colonialist relationship with the area. While I provide some historical background to their practices, the structure of what follows is not linear, advancing chronologically, encounter to encounter. Inspired by literary theory and philosophy, I have instead opted for a more open structure, allowing ideas to seep out, probing into Highland art practice to shake up and unsettle a strict linearity.

In Matthew Wickman's essay in the *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, Wickman argues that, rather than viewing Scotland or Scottish culture as an essential nation or what Derrida refers to as a "philosopheme," we have to view Scotland as more Deleuzian: a series of branching paths, transitions, tendencies, habits that are less the result of some raw nature but are rather the result of pathways cleared through dense forests of experience. He goes on to reinforce the point of Deleuze's rejection of linearity: "the event is a vibration

with an infinity of submultiples – of potential associations.”³⁰ Carla Sassi writes in a very similar vein, alluding to Homi Bhabha alongside Deleuze by applying the concept of hybridization to the Scottish case. She argues for a kind of “glocality” whereby the universal or the global is rewardingly read in the context of the local. So, while each culture can be defined as local as it is produced in a specific time and place, it is also subject to hybridization and encounter (cultural identity is created in the contradictory and ambivalent in-between space of “enunciation”).³¹

Cairns Craig has written persuasively on the Scots essayist and poet Kenneth White (b. 1938) and his nomadic stance, which paradoxically lifts him away from the margins to the very forefront of a movement that may lead to a re-grounding of modern thought. In brief, White may seem to be marginalized by his decision to live on the edge (in Brittany) and by writing about a culture on the edge (Scottish culture), but by his use of a language and a conceptual vocabulary that is current and theoretical he becomes relevant to an international conversation. Craig sees this stance as part of a rediscovered Celtic tradition – certainly not from within an establishment culture or from within the culture industry, but from a deeply Scottish tradition nevertheless. That is a tradition of cultural nomadism that includes the likes of Duns Scot, George Buchanan, David Hume, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Patrick Geddes. White writes passionately about the need for cultural renewal:

What has generally characterized vanguard writing ... is the move from monument to movement, from model and ideal ... out onto *way*. I'm talking about writing as itinerary and as cartography, a tracking and a tracing, out to delineate new space, carrying with it the enlargement of mental categories and an increasing sense of world ... Thereafter, it means moving out of history ... the end of history as primal reference, and as vector towards some longed-for absolute.³²

Perhaps what I am attempting here is not so much a moving out of history as an intrusion into the symmetry of Highland cultural history. Again, White, commenting on his somewhat troubled relations with Scotland, writes about living a “transnational atopia.” He goes on to quote from Roger Caillois: “In any constituted symmetry, a partial and non-accidental break can occur, which tends to complicate the established balance ... *Its effect is to enrich the structure or the organism in which it arises by endowing them with a new property, making them move up to a higher level of organization* [White's emphasis].” White clarifies the point further when he says: “If I've apparently turned my back on Britain, it's maybe in order to find it again, at a deeper level and in a wider context.”³³ The break in White's case is his decision to leave Britain to deepen

his understanding, and we can use this as a model for the way in which other artists and poets – indigenous artists who briefly travel, who leave and come back able to reach “a deeper level,” or those who are travellers who bring with them other ways of seeing. In a similar vein, I intend to show the value of including both the travellers and the politicized indigenous artists in a study of contemporary Highland visual culture.

The “De-territorialization” of Landscape

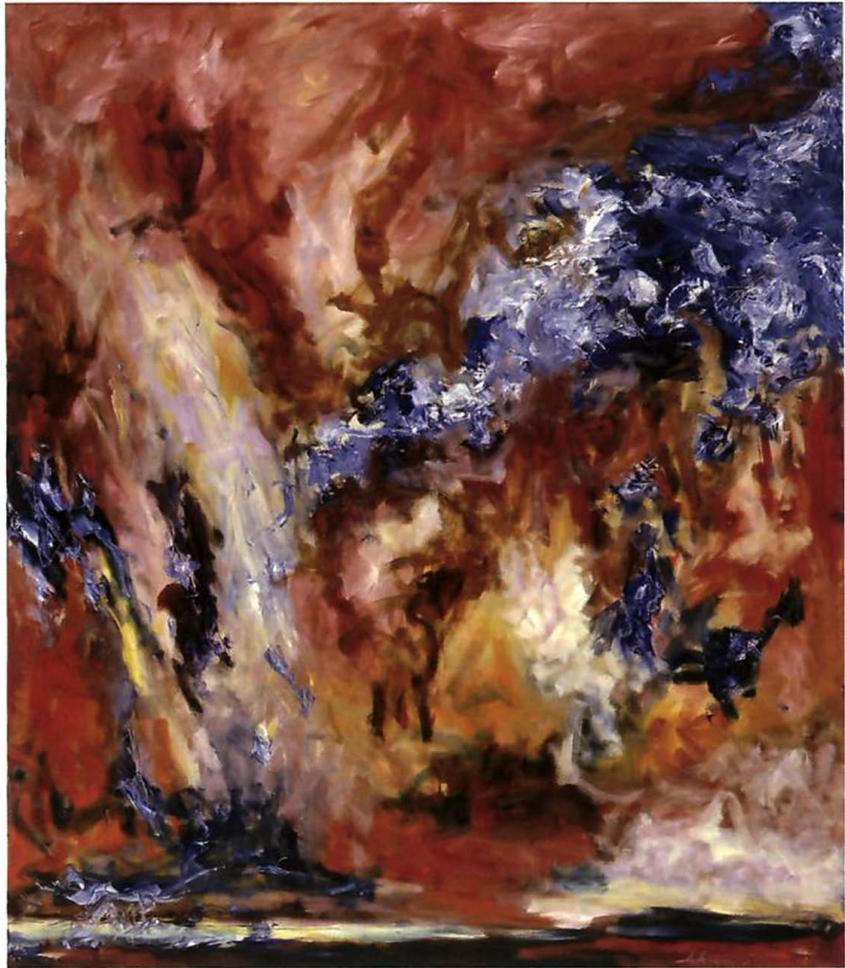
The work of the American Jon Schueler exemplifies this notion of “de-territorialization.” Schueler’s decision to move to a remote location in the Scottish Highlands at the height of his ascendancy in the New York art world was based on a chance meeting and the notion of a promised land. In the 1950s when he was showing with the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, he moved to the village of Mallaig, overlooking the Sound of Sleat. The artworks of his early confrontation with the Highland seascape deliver an intensity, an obsession, a frenzy. At one blow he lifts the approach to the Scottish landscape out of the drawing room with all its picturesqueness, its ancientness, its ethnographical oddities, its “otherness” into another scale, another intensity, another presence, another “self.”

Out of the combination of the spectacular landscape of the Highlands and the vast in-scape of abstract expressionism, Schueler formed a remarkable hybrid (Fig. 8.2). He was able to find a series of visual correspondences in the seascape off the West Coast that would reflect states of mind or being. He was able to “de-territorialize” his New York abstract-expressionist language and in turn “de-territorialize” all earlier images of the Highland landscape. This transformed a tired and jaded pictorialism inherited from Victorian times (with the notable exception of William McTaggart) into a contemporary language of mark-making.

Schueler’s work has not been wholly absorbed into the narrative of abstract expressionism, which frees art historians to insert his work into a far more complex reading; because his way of seeing was at odds with the dominant discourses of his day, he may yet become part of a discourse in which he takes his place in the development of a transnational visual language of the Scottish Highlands.

Signs in movement, movement in signs were the elusive elements which Schueler was seeking. The signifier does not have to reproduce some natural object; it can just produce the shape of the movement itself – the stroke, the curve, the slash, the turn, the daub, the swirl. Schueler obviously sensed that, when motion rather than perspective is chosen as the means of expression, it yields instead of a static picture a dynamic one. There are photographs of the

8.2 Jon Schueler, *Snow
Cloud over the Sound of Sleat*,
1959. Oil on canvas, 228 x
198 cm (o/c 58-13). © Jon
Schueler Estate. Courtesy
of the Jon Schueler Estate.

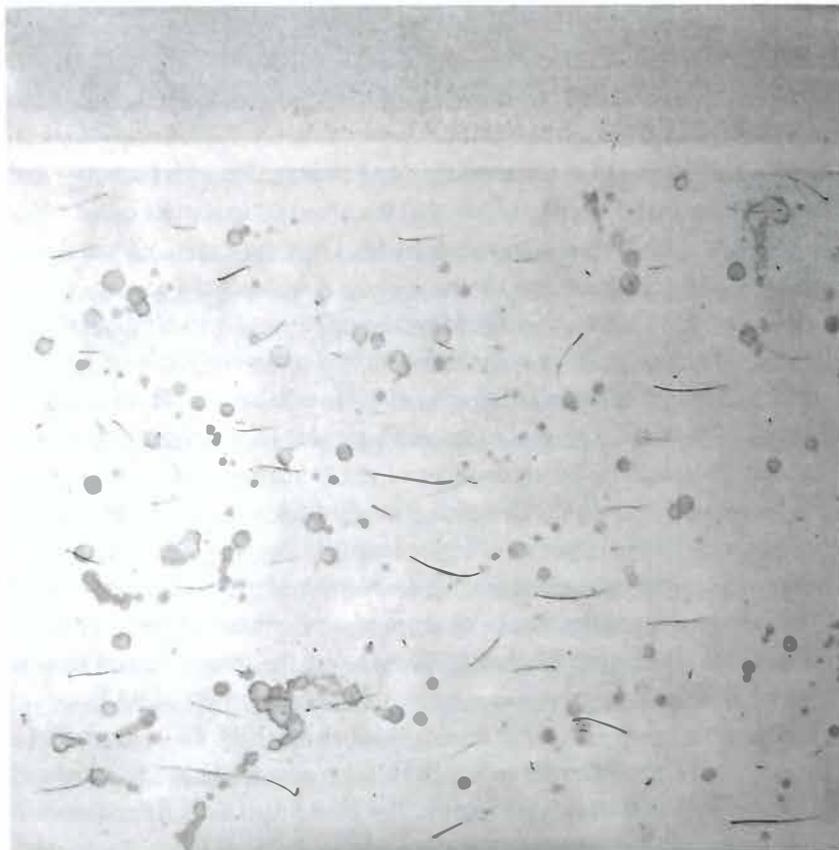


artist seated before a series of paintings he is working on: the image embodies the nature of the process. That which was active within the man has become suddenly powerfully alive in the works themselves. One particular photograph of Schueler very near the end of his life has him leaning forward in a kind of quietness regarding the energy in front of him.³⁴ The juxtaposition of the real (in the sense of simulacrum) and the abstract is dramatic. Schueler himself as iconic signifier faces onto the indexical, and the energy that was once within the man has been translated into a parallel energy within these stunning and powerful abstract pieces in their swirling yet constructed reds and blues.³⁵

Schueler also brought with him a different attitude toward audience. His relationship with the fishing community in Mallaig encouraged him to exhibit his work in a small, local village hall, without “white box” conditions (1971); he

collaborated with a filmmaker – a practice, at that time, more common in New York – screening the outcome at both Mallaig and the Usher Hall, Edinburgh (1972). Also, given the financial implications of shipping large canvases from the United States, he took the extraordinary decision to paint his Edinburgh, Talbot Rice Art Centre exhibition (1981) live in front of the audience, starting out the show with blank, neutral canvases – Schueler introduced into the visualization of the Highlands another physical scale. A remarkable testimony to the artist's relationship with the Highland community of Mallaig was delivered at *An Linne: The Jon Schueler Centenary Symposium*, 2016 on the Isle of Skye when members of the fishing community described just how they had been affected by the artist and his transformative vision.³⁶

To see a contemporary development of the vision that Schueler brought to the representation of the landscape, we can look to the work of Scottish/Highland-located artist Marian Leven (b. 1944). Leven works from studios in Tayport and Achiltibuie. She studied weaving and textiles at college but has been working with acrylics, oils, and watercolours on paper and canvas since



8.3 Marian Leven,
Flux, 2012. Acrylic
on canvas, 122 × 122
cm. © Marian Leven.
Photo: Chris Park.

the late 1960s. She has moved decisively away from large mimetic canvases to discover her own abstract forms. The stimulus may begin with landscape – the coastline, sea, and sky – but it then becomes mark-making and the creation of spaces, or a “kind of stage” upon which art “unfolds”³⁷ (Fig. 8.3). Anna Lovatt’s writing on mark-making reminds us of Jacques Derrida’s “Scene of Language,” where the “subject of writing is not an isolated author, but a layered system of differential relations in which the writer, the instrument of inscription, the reader and society all play a part.”³⁸ Instead of presenting us with a *fait accompli*, a full narrative, Schueler and Leven offer us instead, marks on a canvas – sometimes even just the sketchiest of armatures – upon which our own experience comes into play.

Performance, Encounter, Image, and Text

Among the cultural figures of the twentieth century, it can be argued that the one who has done the most to effect a radical change in the way people think about or perceive art in their lives is German artist Joseph Beuys.³⁹ His practice of “Social Sculpture” and performance, as well as his lectures and teachings in Scotland, challenged the dominant narratives of the prevailing ideology.⁴⁰ Instead of framing something in front of the passive “elect” body as typically found in Scotland’s cultural space, Beuys generated a meaningful dialogue as part of the 1970 Edinburgh Festival’s *Strategy: Get Arts* program, bringing peat, bog pine, and copper from an interaction and communion with Loch Awe and Rannoch Moor in the Highlands (Fig. 8.4) to an “action” in the city called *Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch) Scottish Symphony* (1970). Over the course of his eleven years of visiting Scotland and the Highlands, Beuys raised questions about social and political issues: about poverty; about the penal system; about the oil industry. He attempted to re-map the function of art in society by suggesting a replacement of the fatalistic allegories of the inevitable with his own radical allegories of the possible – this vision was key to his Highland focus.⁴¹

Richard Demarco (b. 1930), founder of the Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, brought Beuys to Scotland. Demarco strongly believes that the Highlands represent something altogether different from Edinburgh and the Scottish art scene, and his work has helped make it so. Scottish-born Demarco was always looking outward for connections – as artist, curator, cultural activist – and was as iconoclastic as the poet Hugh MacDiarmid with the same high seriousness about the social and moral role that culture should play in the world.⁴²

Social engagement is a distinctive feature of much of the culture of the Gàidhealtachd and so Beuys’s approach found resonance in its literature and folklore, as well as in its visual culture. The blackboard as “a demonstration object” plays an increasingly prominent role in *Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch)*.⁴³ Caroline Tisdall explains further: “From the earliest days of his Fluxus con-



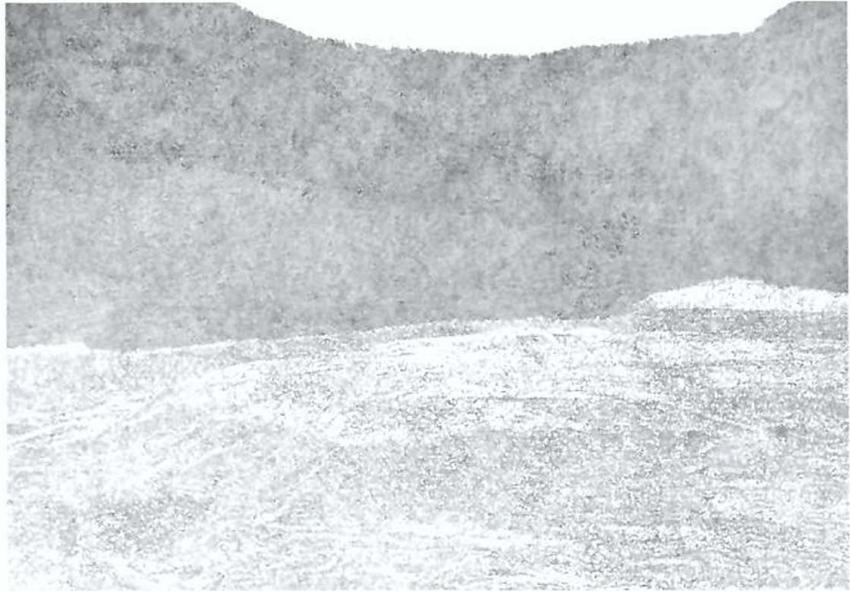
certs, Beuys had been using blackboards as carriers of information that could be changed during the course of an action ... Throughout the performance [of *Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch)*] Beuys made and erased a series of drawings on a single board, manoeuvring it with a shepherd's crook and holding it aloft as if it were a highly charged piece of equipment."⁴⁴ Art no longer emitted its "aura" within the confines of the cultural community but became part of the everyday.⁴⁵

The part Demarco played in setting out a whole new grounding for Highland art and its transnational potential cannot be overstated. For him, the Highland landscape and culture represent another world altogether from the rest of Scotland. Demarco's huge ambitions for a Highland/Celtic contemporary art form are paradoxically intertwined with the distant past. His own sense of internationalism is grounded in a sense of the mythic – a mythic/historic consciousness of the ancient kingdom of Dalriada. In interview with Janet McKenzie for *Studio International*, he said:

The Road to Meikle Seggie is a road both in reality, defined by the history of Scotland, and also in the world of mythology, associated with

8.4 Richard Demarco, Joseph Beuys exploring the shoreline of Loch Awe in the act of making his first art work in Scotland – entitled "The Loch Awe Piece" – as a gift to Richard Demarco, 1970. Original: 35mm negative. Courtesy of Richard Demarco.

8.5 Helen MacAlister, *A Participant Observer*, 2011. Pencil on paper, 2008, A2. Screenprint, edition of 10.54 × 76 cm. Printed by Paul Liam Harrison, Visual Research Centre, Dundee. Original image © British Geological Survey. Photographer: John McKenzie.



such legendary figures as Fingal and his son, Ossian, and Thomas the Rhymer ... It is the road that takes you resolutely away from the urban space where you will find modern art galleries and museums. It is the road offering adventure and risk-taking. It eventually joins the mystical “Road to the Isles” as it crosses Rannoch Moor and heads for the Hebridean islands and shorelines.⁴⁶

Demarco's internationalism, allied with his sense of a distinctive Highland cultural identity, is an essential component in another map of a transnational Highland artistic consciousness. Euan McArthur, in his essay “A Highland Decade” (2007), writes: “the Highlands and what they contain ... were never for Demarco, code for ‘the past.’ His interest is always in the living culture. The past that shapes the present and how the present construes the past is one of the many cultural dialogues that fascinate him wherever he travels.”⁴⁷

Something of this didactic element, as well as the primacy of the oral tradition, is found in the work of Scots artist Helen MacAlister (b. 1969), but there is something beyond this as well: something that owes more to the whole development of semiotics especially within the radical intellectual movements in France throughout the twentieth century. MacAlister's work is stridently anti-pictorial: she will concentrate on text as a thing in itself to re-signify a word or an idiom from Scots or Gaelic. Éric Alliez and Peter Osborne draw attention to the continuing preoccupation in France with the relationship between aesthetics and semiotics: “the philosophical question of the relationship

between image and word ... continues to delineate the parameters of debate. And with regard to contemporary art, discussion thus focuses on the *aesthetic image*, the image in its aesthetic determination as (conceptually) *under-determined*.⁴⁸ MacAlister has embraced the idea that the aesthetic image is conceptually underdetermined by rejecting any kind of image that could be appropriated by hegemonic forces (political, commercial, or cultural). She will typically represent either the indexical word or phrase or even just a number, as in the number of monoglot Gaelic speakers recorded in census data. The same conviction runs through the pieces that she constructed from landform diagrams of the Highlands for the geological society epitomized in the piece entitled *A Participant Observer* (2011) (Fig. 8.5). She depicts for us an alluvial fan, a meeting point in the natural world, a moment of transformation where one substance confronts and partially assimilates another. The title, a term borrowed from the legendary folklore collector Hamish Henderson, returns us to the pedagogical, Beuys, and the idea of the collective consciousness. While the expression is axiomatic with the collector's relationship with the tradition, we are remarkably close to the idea in the parallel world of the visual arts of the "artist as witness."

Personal and Public Histories and the Place for Technology

Another artist to bring into the visual language of the Highlands a whole new range of signifiers is Daniel Reeves. Reeves arrived into the Outer Hebrides from the United States in 1985, via occupations and periods of living in the Philippines, Vietnam, Guatemala, India, Wales, Northern Spain, and the North of France.⁴⁹ He remained in the Highlands until the year 2000. During this period he produced a body of profoundly original works: digital paintings, video films, and multi-media installations. He articulated precisely the conditions in the Highland thoughtscape which allowed him to discover "multiplicities" within: "Essentially in my life during those years there was a calmness, quietude and deliberate attention to kestrels, peat bogs, marine life, tide pools, constantly shifting skies and wind patterns, voles, and stones so old and weathered; all set down in patterns beyond the edge of remembered time, full of mystery and resisting any simple explanation."⁵⁰ Reeves's sense of constant movement and patterns waiting to be read is remarkably reminiscent of the writing of English novelist and poet John Berger (1926–2017) in his description of the Scottish Isle of Gigha:

The crofters' cottages crouch like animals sheltering on the ground for the night. Everything moves on, the larches, the bracken, the caledonian pines, the heather, the juniper bushes, the scrap grass. And then moving



8.6 Daniel Reeves, *I Have This One Afternoon*, 1999. Digital painting, Lambda print bonded to glass, 115 x 293 cm. Daniel Reeves, private collection.

into the land, water: the rivers running to the sea, the sea with its tides filling lochs. And across both land and water the wind. And, above all, the northwest wind. The honking of the wild geese in the sky is like a fleeting measure, a counting in another algebra, of all this movement.⁵¹

What is especially pertinent to my argument here is the emphasis on movement and the response of the senses. In their responses to place, Berger and Reeves do not analyze or interpret, they describe; they do not feel a sense of self or identification. They describe the relationship between landscape and things as Reeves muses, “resisting any simple explanation.”⁵²

Reeves’s film *Obsessive Becoming* (1990–95), resolved during the period he lived in the Outer Hebrides, is a dense rhetorical and visual stream-narrative lasting fifty-four minutes, which forms a completely new structure, or public space, for an exploration of both self and politics. *Obsessive Becoming* begins with the camera closing in and interrogating his own family on the subject of abuse and violence with its roots in “secrets and lies.” The film tape widens into a montage of the horrors of twentieth-century warfare – the one begets the other – “the secrets in this family were immense, the secrets in this world are immense.”⁵³ Reeves’s strategy to reject the divide between the private and public is visualized with a poetic virtuosity as he weaves and layers images of his childhood self with iconography from the Warsaw Ghetto, Vietnam, Hiroshima, and the Gulf War. The unrelenting profusion of violent images presents us with a kind of phantasmagoria of the real (Fig. 8.6).

Reeves's receptivity to innovations in video technology and his mastery of technical processes gave him the language through which he could uncover his own past and connect this to a collective consciousness. He appropriated the very latest technologies to arrange and compose his archival probing as he un-fixed the apparently stable and static images from the past. His visual poems/documentaries/installations are like religious meditations: circular, revolving around a point whose location is limitless, circles of ever-expanding and contracting attention. It was as though he found in the Highland communities and landscapes the sense of so many other selves within. His works have redefined our sense of what experimental video can bring to the politicized autobiography – relations are multiple, not linear, the self morphs and evolves, familiar faces from our histories dissolve and reappear, and the whole stream is accompanied by incantations and echoes amid the omnipresent metaphorical motifs of stone and water. We might reflect here on Ascherson's description of the "concentric circles pecked into the rock around a central cup" which were cut between 5,500 and 4,500 years ago.⁵⁴ Argyll is particularly rich in these markings: in Kilmartin Glen, for example, there are about a dozen known markings in a family of designs. The synergy between Reeves's thinking within the Highland landscape and these traces of the "rock art" from Neolithic times unexpectedly reinforces Ascherson's contention that the most powerful revelation is the one where the mental boundary between life and non-life is transcended.

To further illustrate the synergy between Ascherson's thinking and Reeves's work created when living in the Highlands, we have *Eingang* (1990–98), a three-channel video installation and sculpture composed of sections of Douglas Fir, beach cobbles, glass bowls, volcanic rock, rice, and saffron – Reeves's ingenious materialization of the Zen principles of the interconnectedness of all things.⁵⁵ And we see, most tellingly, in the poetic short film *Sombra a Sombra* (1988), a meditation on the architecture of an abandoned village as evoked in the poetry of Cesar Vallejo.⁵⁶ Reeves here employs the dissolve and the isolated disappearing object as a technique, almost a metaphor, for his conceptual approach – there is no simple linear life to death progression within his vision but rather all is cyclical, part of a pattern of ever-changing forms. The death masks of the poet John Keats, composer Felix Mendelssohn, naturalist John James Audubon, and physicist Isaac Newton are subtly merged with the faces of young Scottish soldiers in Korea to produce a haunting confluence in Reeves's digital painting *Keats in Korea* (1990). This is a more literal example of Reeves's engagement with cyclical time – "that all moments exist in not only the present moment but in all other moments past and still to come."⁵⁷ In Ascherson's text the historian's musings on the biographies of the stones suggest that the ancient people are still there, present and incised into their rock art.

“Social Sculpture” Acting as “Witness”

8.7 Will Maclean and Marian Leven, *An Sùileachan*, 2013. Stone, wood, granite, iron, 24 × 8 m. Copyright artists. Photo by Dr Colin Macdonald.

Will Maclean and Marian Leven’s collaboration on the stone construction *An Sùileachan* (2013) is a distinctive piece of socially engaged practice from the Highlands (Fig. 8.7). It is interesting to reflect on the connections at this point: Maclean, Leven, Schueler, and Beuys were artists at the heart of the Demarco circle in the early 1970s and through the 1980s. Demarco staged Maclean’s first show in the Melville Crescent Gallery in October of 1970 and, according to Maclean, the gallery director played “a big part in [their] lives.”⁵⁸ Demarco discouraged Maclean and Leven from emigrating to Australia and facilitated the



first major research project by Maclean – a visual record of West Coast ring net fishing (1978). In the connections between Beuys and Maclean, there is a shared vital interest in the minority cultures at the margins of Europe and North America. They also share the notion that an object can contain magical or sacred qualities – for Maclean, the scapular bone, a pigskin pouch, the sternpost of a boat and for Beuys, fat, felt, peat bog, and the “Eurasian staff.” Both Beuys and Maclean distance themselves from connoisseurship and the “objet d’art.” Maclean’s early project *The Ring-Net* (1978) is wholly integrated within a locale, an industry, and a way of life – the place/work/folk algorithm.

Maclean and Leven’s *An Sùileachan* is a site-specific, environmental sculpture with radical, political dimensions. It sits in a remarkable geophysical setting at Reef on Lewis. In terms of the specifics of the forms, the distinctive doorway speaks of the Inuit *tupqujaq* – a large structure through which a shaman might enter the spirit world – and the two circular chambers invoke the Pictish double-disc markings of the East Wemyss caves in Fife. Maclean’s search for connections have often led him to the North – recent works include *Shelly Man/Iceland* (2011) and *Sildar Dance/Iceland* (2011). Peter Davidson’s *The Idea of North* (2005) cites many visual examples of a specifically Northern consciousness linking the Highlands of Scotland with the arts of the Scandinavian countries, Japan, China, and Canada. Davidson achieves some deft and lyrical summations especially in the speculative early pages, which relate directly to Maclean’s and Leven’s work *An Sùileachan*:

Once they have been seen, even in photographs, the landscapes of the Arctic are an inevitable and insistent element in anyone’s idea of north. One of their most haunting elements is the Inuit work in placed stones within the Arctic landscape of Nunavut, in northernmost Canada. These works are minimal interventions – the slight, but moving rearrangement of what is already there – placed and balanced stones. These inuksuit articulate, transform and (at times literally) frame the north.⁵⁹

An Sùileachan is dedicated to the Lewis people of the nineteenth century who were cleared from their land and to the twentieth-century Land Raiders of Reef.⁶⁰ As such, it examines the notion of the counter-narrative from the perspective of the dispossessed. Being a piece of participatory art, with stone works, iron works, and woodwork by Lewis craftsmen, this artwork reflects far more than the perceptions of the two individuals. *An Sùileachan* works, politically and philosophically, to engage the people of Lewis in a dialogical relationship with their histories. In other words the language is connected syntagmatically with land art, “Social Sculpture,” and in an aesthetic sense shares something of that language; but it operates paradigmatically also with the past

and a projected future for the community. It denotes the possibilities of what the community may become. The position of *An Sùileachan* certainly finds its echo in Beuys's notion of the function of art. Beuys envisaged an art that would resume a centrality within the life of the community. "Social Sculpture" for Beuys is "how we mould and shape the world in which we live: Sculpture as an evolutionary process; everyone an artist."⁶¹

In Conclusion

At the opening of their recent publication on *Art and Politics*, philosophers Éric Alliez and Peter Osborne write about transnational discourses as they are at the present time. They consider three sets of essays on art and politics from France, Germany, and Italy and look at the differences between them. The philosophers aim to be absolutely clear about the nature of these differences: "The distinctiveness of each set [of essays] derives not from any singular national intellectual tradition – however broadly defined – but from its nationally specific articulation of transnational discourses: internationally circulating discourses received and transformed into 'culture' as part of the histories of particular states."⁶² What is distinctive about these postnational discourses is that they are politically oppositional or alternative streams of thought: "they are not just part of the cultural histories of these states, but situated 'in and against' – as well as between – them."⁶³

I hope that this chapter as a whole could serve as the starting point for a different kind of writing about Highland art. The Scottish satirists Colvin and Avery, with their postcolonial/post-modernist discourse, Jon Schueler with his abstract expressionist syntax, Beuys with his reprised high modernist ideals and the far-sighted advocacy of Demarco, Reeves with his mesmeric visual poetry, MacAlister with her new historicism, and Maclean and Leven with their radical, political "re-territorialization" of land art and sculpture: such is the sketch of an emergent dynamic visual language. In recent times the Columba Initiative has revitalized the dialogue between the Scottish and Irish Gàidhealtachd, but alongside this reorientation we must celebrate the way that the international artists who came to the Highlands in the twentieth century have dramatically altered the outlines of the visual art map of the area. They have immeasurably broadened the terms of the debate and reinvigorated the language of the discourse. This chapter begins the process of locating contemporary Highland visual culture within its evolving futures in order to rearticulate how new technologies, new radical political geographies, and new aesthetic forms can recharge existing narratives.