

morning star

morning star evening star

MELBOURNE ↔ SCOTLAND
Cultural Exchange

AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY, 200 GERTRUDE STREET, MUSEUM OF MODERN ART AT HEIDE

contents

- 5] **morning star evening star** MELBOURNE CURATORIUM
- 7] **uncontrollable** SCOTTISH CURATORIUM

- 9] **new messages on server** Christopher Chapman
- 10] **melbourne, egypt** Kevin Murray
- 12] **cities of glasgow** Francis McKee
- 13] **two thoughts** Robyn McKenzie
- 14] **seeing something wonderful** (a thought from here to there) Judith Findlay
- 15] **I don't know** Geoff Lowe
- 16] **institutions: beyond care** Pavel Büchler
- 18] **surfing the wild face of capitalism** Stephen O'Connell
- 19] **an open letter** Ross Sinclair

- 25] **habitat** Stuart Koop and Charlotte Day

- 41] **Strangely Familiar** Clare Williamson
- 49] *Strolling* Max Delany
- 64] **melbourne/glasgow studio exchange** Charlotte Day

evening star

MELBOURNE ↔ SCOTLAND

Melbourne Glasgow Edinburgh Cultural Exchange Project

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MELBOURNE CURATORIUM

morning star evening star is a multifaceted project which reflects on the relativity of cultural positioning, and which specifically draws on the artistic practices currently located in Melbourne, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Rather than providing a monolithic project based on a model of cultural import/export and national representation, **morning star evening star** is presented as a series of discrete but integrated exhibitions, studio residencies and events across a twelve month period in which the work of Australian artists is considered alongside that of artists from Scotland. Shared concerns are highlighted, evidence of increasing globalisation as well as the particular cultural and social connections between these urban locales.

The idea for such a project emerged in 1996 when three curators from Glasgow visited Melbourne as part of a larger research trip to Australia. Nicola White, Charles Esche and Toby Webster (then from the Centre for Contemporary Art, Tramway and Transmission respectively) were struck by the interesting and constructively 'abrasive' relationship which exists between these places, at both an institutional level, and at the level of current art practice.

As a result of these observations, we, as curators working across contemporary art spaces in Melbourne, were invited to make a return research trip to Scotland to further explore the potential for collaborative projects between artists, curators and organisations both here and there. Undertaken in January 1997, this trip built upon the relationships and considerable traffic of artists already established through such avenues as the Samstag scholarships for Australian artists, and exhibitions such as the 1996 Biennale of Sydney, the Liverpool Video Biennale, Pictura Britannica, and Nerve, a series of projects initiated by contemporary art spaces in Sydney.

In Scotland we were generously hosted and were privileged to engage in an intensive program of artists' studio visits as well as meetings with curatorial staff and arts funding bodies. Extensive viewings of slide registers and publishing initiatives, and visits to museums, galleries, artist-run spaces, and the Glasgow School of Art added to our understanding of practice in the region.

Melbourne, Glasgow, and indeed Edinburgh, share a not dissimilar history, of nineteenth century industrialism, of grided urban plans, and of architectural endeavour. In both regions, arguably, an assumed, or imposed, peripheral status to certain European centres has operated in the cultural imagination and practice. While Australia finds itself in a very different situation vis-a-vis Aboriginal Australia and the Asia-Pacific region, both countries seem to straddle nationalist and internationalist positions, being concerned with the articulation of national and regional imperatives in the face of colonial and market relations, whilst equally ambitious to communicate to international audiences.

At the level of institutions, it could be said that neither centre has a monolithic museum or gallery which fulfils the aspirations of the contemporary art community. Perhaps this is an unfulfillable promise for any city. However, both centres benefit from having complex and active networks of smaller museums, contemporary art spaces, university galleries, and artist-run initiatives which operate in a cooperative and collaborative fashion in the development of ambitious and active programs.

It is especially at the level of art practice that affinities and correspondences are identifiable: in the proliferation of artist-run spaces; in the interest of artists in investigating social life through situationist, time-based and performative practices; and in the strategic development and distribution of work for exhibition elsewhere. *morning star evening star* reflects these convergences and invites consideration and enjoyment of the work of artists who are based in Australia and Scotland today. As the project title suggests, the evening star is the morning star; it just depends on your point of view.

uncontrollable

Charles Esche & Toby Webster

You have to ask 'why Scotland?' or at least why should any arbitrary geographical location warrant specific exhibition. After all, we are not concerned with niceties of international cultural exchange. Scotland is not an international country with whom Australia could have diplomatic relations. There has to be another justification, one which is hopefully premised on an attitude to art and cultural production which has emerged from Glasgow and Melbourne in particular over the last 8-9 years.

CHARLES ESCHÉ
and **TOBY WEBSTER**
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The official history of Glasgow is so well rehearsed we imagine it is familiar to many Australians. The city's zenith was in the early nineteenth century. As a self-proclaimed second city of the British Empire, it saw huge industrial expansion and wealth pouring into its private shipbuilding and trade enterprises. The last hundred years have been distinctly less fortunate. It reached something of a nadir in the 1930s-50s when the image of no mean city (a book and a film about violent crime in the Gorbals) came to dominate the city's national and international image. The city now remains relatively poor with a high proportion of public spending and significant levels of unemployment and individual poverty.

The citizens of Glasgow would, on the whole, intersperse this history with a rather different story of a proactive community committed to collective solutions, defending their hard-won rights and almost – in 1919 – sparking revolution. It is a history which can be enabling, part of a way of thinking which encourages the new and challenges the status quo. For artists, particularly from the late 1980s onwards, it offered an opportunity to re-imagine the idea of an artistic community and, given the lack of precedents, the necessity of doing so from scratch.

Transmission – a small artist-run space in the city centre – must take the lion's share of any institutional credit for the strength of Glasgow's contemporary art world. It began as a response by resident artists to living and working in the city. With a strong membership and a rotating committee which you can be on for two years, it has passed through many phases. This structure ensures that it never fails to respond to emerging and ambitious new practice as well as recognising its forbears. Alongside an innovative program of exhibitions that constantly challenges the limits of the gallery, Transmission has shown Lawrence Weiner, Lothar Baumgarten, Hanne Darboven, Karen Klimnik and Michel Auder amongst many other international artists. It acts as a beacon for artists, especially those newly arrived in the city and its value as a home-base and resource for young artists cannot be underestimated.

The Glasgow arts community established Transmission and the Gallery remains very close to its heart. With new initiatives like The Modern Institute, Glasgow continues to challenge the established structure of organisations and creates new strategies for the presentation and production of art, keeping itself closely based on the needs of the artist.

While Glasgow is being celebrated with recent focus exhibitions in Berne, Berlin, Oslo, and Sydney, this exhibition will also take place in Edinburgh. Now, after our half step towards self government, it seems that the east coast city might be beginning to stir from its happy dreams of Enlightenment. The challenge to a city where the cultivation of self-satisfaction has sometimes seemed to be its greatest contribution to contemporary culture is to develop a critical edge, a climate which provokes the deeply entrenched establishment class into a few sleepless nights. The smaller galleries, notably Collective and Stills, are forging a new confidence which might begin the process of creating this critical community for artists. At the same time, new initiatives in Dundee, Portree and near Aberdeen herald the spread of Glasgow's influence throughout the country.

In the context of this encomium to the Scottish art scene, it is important to realise that the artists in this exhibition have few opportunities to sell or exhibit in their own country. Most of the Institutions fail to acknowledge the quality of the work represented here and no artist from this 'generation' is represented in public collections. Perhaps, in a way, this rather undermines prospects for the artist's long term survival, but this rejection also strengthens the artist's hand. Intransigence and ignorance give something to kick against.

So what of the work itself? As ever in a group show it is impossible to generalise without limiting and excluding certain aspects of individual practice. The media, method and subject matter of each of the artists have little in common. The most frequently shared interest is probably drinking in a bar, often together, talking about work and the world. Though apparently trivial, the experience should not be dismissed as irrelevant. It is a recognition of a fundamental aspect of the art community – its sense of togetherness and collective endeavour. If the finished artworks appear unrelated, what unifies this or any other potential grouping is a first hand knowledge and understanding of each other's work. Openings are about artists meeting and exchanging ideas. Artists show visiting curators around promoting themselves through an active and involved group. Ideas, techniques and opportunities are thrown into the pot and to trace influences from one artist to another would be a pointless task. The self awareness of the projects undertaken by both Melbourne and Scotland show a similar approach to the exhibition space as a laboratory of data capable of generating various forms. The exhibition becomes an event somewhere between conspiracy and an accident, whose accidental nature would be naive and unconvincing to want to destroy. The exhibition venue or site becomes a place of revelation rather than merely a receptacle for enhancing things.

On our brief visit to Melbourne in 1996, we were struck by some familiar impressions. We sensed in the art community a similar self awareness and a desire to engage with the art world outside the immediate locality which characterises the best of Scottish discourse.

new messages on server

Christopher Chapman

When I used to drive from Canberra to Sydney with my Scottish friend Kevin it didn't matter what music was on the radio, or really, where we were on the freeway. The landscape, flat and vast, stretched ahead of us and disappeared behind us as we held fast to the snaking bitumen-compound that traced its contours and sometimes left the ground to soar like a ribbon caught in a breeze above deep lushly-vegetated chasms.

We all inhabit the same planet, and it follows that we understand and create a recognisable global culture. Those of us who live in the so-called Western world react to its fast-paced information systems as though they were second nature to us. Actually, they are nature. Nature hasn't changed, it's just always changing. Just wait for nanotechnology and molecular engineering to take hold in a big way. It should only be another twenty years or so.

Forget the distinctions between the natural world and the cultural world. Nature has always been intricately cultured, culture and technology are the logical outcome of all that has come before now, since our universe (as we understand it) was created about thirteen billion years ago. As theoretical physicist Michio Kaku suggests, humankind may become a Type I civilisation in a century or two, controlling all planetary phenomena (Type II can manipulate an entire star, Type III, a galaxy). Obviously, we all share in this future. And importantly, while it is 'scientific' in import, it is entirely cultural in effect.

Art can change the world (as it already has) because it is a part of culture and therefore a part of the machine of existence. How do we reconcile the distinctions between 'global' and 'local'

experience and action? Between 'art' and 'life'? If the question should no longer be why we exist but how, where can we situate genealogical imperative in relation to genetic reality? How does the democratisation of information and its possibilities for the freedom of expression relate to the empowerment of retrograde and dangerous political forces?

But global culture doesn't imply singularity. Its very foundation relies on infinitely variable degrees of difference. What is important for us, now, is to work together and mould this collection of particles into an apparatus that works for us. Our subjectivities, our identities, and our histories condition our approach. The 'local' isn't at odds with the 'global'. Let's use our art to mould the surface of reality. Let's think about how art can make a difference and work across cultural and social boundaries. Let's make ideas real. And let's get busy.

CHRISTOPHER CHAPMAN

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melbourne, egypt

'Some writer has described Melbourne as Glasgow, with the sky of Alexandria...'

Kevin Murray

Thus Fergus Hume follows the thoughts of Mr Carlton, as he strolls down Collins Street in his novel *Mystery of the Hansom Cab* (1886). Set in marvellous Melbourne, Hume's murder mystery was a runaway success, selling half a million copies worldwide and launching the author on an illustrious writing career. And thus as a Scottish-Egyptian hybrid, this bustling antipodean city was announced to the world.

I've always puzzled at the origin of this geographical juxtaposition. The identity of 'some writer' remains a mystery, though the author himself displays a fascination for exotic skies. Elsewhere in the book he describes the clouds outside St Kilda's Esplanade Hotel as resembling a Doré etching.

The form is as curious as the content. The swapping of land and sky seems like a surreal children's game, where bodies, heads and legs are randomly changed to produce strange hybrids. But there is method in this madness. Like Freud's technique of free association, we might consider that Melbourne is host to some unconscious link between the Scottish and Egyptian cities.

First, let's get the cleverness out of the way. Alexandria itself was often seen as a divided city, facing the Mediterranean with its back to Egypt. It was this division, of course, which provided the context for the high romance between Cleopatra and Mark Antony. Alexandria thus contains the very difference that brings it into relation with Glasgow. Now the deconstructive business is done, we can return to the text.

For Mr Carlton, Alexandria promises an exotic destiny for the otherwise dour Scot. Hume's hero continues this line of thought to a future vision in which the sturdy Anglo-Saxon rootstock has mellowed into 'a luxurious appreciation of arts and sciences'.

KEVIN MURRAY
(of Brunswick) is
an independent curator,
teacher and writer

What if we could bring Mr Carlton back to judge the accuracy of his predictions? Contemporary Melburnians like artist Andrea Goldsmith think of the city as an 'old and trusted aunt'. Given the inexorable force of consumer culture, and the demise of any romantic high culture, she may well fall in with the artists of this exhibition, for whom Melbourne is more likely Glasgow with the sky of Minneapolis.

In the end, Alexandria ended up as a bad bet. Even Mark Twain complained that 'Alexandria was too much like a European city to be novel'. In Australia, Alexandria turns up as a suburb of Sydney, not Melbourne. But there is a consolation prize. Melbourne playwright Barry Dickens does claim that 'Sydney' is an Aboriginal word meaning 'Melbourne'. And in the last decade, Melbourne's cultural precinct has acquired structures resembling Cleopatra's Needle and Caesar's Palace.

So why Alexandria and Glasgow in the first place? The truth may indeed be a little closer to home. If you look closely at a map of Scotland you will find a small town just a little northwest of Glasgow. You can guess its name.

cities of glasgow

Francis McKee

You may have read Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. It charts a series of meetings between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. In each meeting Marco Polo describes a city he has seen on his travels. It's clear that each time he is really talking of Venice.

If I were to describe Glasgow, I would have to adopt a similar technique. At first glance it may not seem as dramatic as Venice and its influence on the artistic community might appear negligible. But on closer inspection, the city reveals layers of history, tensions and contradictions that more than match any city in the world. It could, for instance, be described as the birthplace of capitalism – Adam Smith wrote the *Wealth of Nations* there in 1776, surrounded by the prosperous mansions of the merchants who controlled Virginia and ran slaves from Africa.

Yet in 1919, the city created the first Soviet consul in Britain and tanks were stationed in the meat market, ready to quell rioting workers in the 'Petrograd on the Clyde'. The fabric of the city itself teems with signs and emblems, traces of past histories and disappearing lives. Inscribed in many of the buildings are small Masonic hieroglyphs, connecting the city fathers to the lost tribes of Egypt and the temple of Solomon.

The secret language of tramps covers the back walls of convents and rich houses where savage dogs might lurk or nuns may dispense food. Even the 26 miles of tunnels carrying water to the city from Loch Katrine are scored with the coded signs of Irish immigrant workers who built them in the nineteenth century. Down the river, the unfinished hulks of Chinese gas tankers lie in the docks, each hull plate scrawled with shipbuilders' graffiti ('if cabbages could fly, bobby would be squadron leader'). There are still rumours of a buried village under Central Station.

The city has a sweet tooth. On the corner of Jamaica Street there are four franchises: McDonalds, Dunkin Donuts, Pizza Hut and KFC. Each of them are among the highest grossing outlets for their chain in Europe.

The city of the rich in the centre is ringed with motorways, the cities of the poor lie beyond that fence huddled in tower blocks. The bars spread across Glasgow like a web, altering realities and breeding ideas that vanish as quickly as they sprout. The police cruise the network of tenemented streets, restoring a certain brand of reality on a temporary basis. The churches, bewildered, still rise from the ashes once a week.

In the end, these facts remain meaningless for the artists working here. As Calvino concludes: 'You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours'.

FRANCIS MCKEE
is Curator
at Centre
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Arts in Glasgow.

two thoughts

Robyn McKenzie

The fabric of daily life – surroundings, events, people, 'stuff that happens' – has become a definitive subject of 90s art. Its flip side is the personal narrative. Invariably it is the artist's own mother, friends, kitchen sink, that the story is about.

thought 1:

It seems in part a reaction against the theoretical overload of the 1980s, fed by a yearning for things not to be so hard. It argues for an art that can be reached and understood through experience: simpler, more direct, immediate, accessible. It argues for an art on the same level as ordinary day-to-day life, part of the same continuum of existence.

The problem is that as art, it still demands certain privileges: primarily the interest and attention of the viewer who comes to look at it. But does it deserve them any more? Precisely because of the ordinariness and banality of its subject – only minimally shifted in the transformation from life into art – its debt to or reliance on the difference and distinction we accord art, and the artist, is magnified; things rebound, logic is inverted. This type of work can appear precisely the opposite of what it intends: obscure, precious, narcissistic.

thought 2:

Rather than being about bridging the gap between art and life, this work reveals a new distance, or alienation, from 'life' itself. The 'everyday' – the supposedly known, unremarkable, familiar – is held in a new type of regard, commanding fascination, even awe. It is as if the world is new, or seen for the first time. But like in some sort of out-of-body experience, vision is attentive but strangely disengaged – looking on. The best of this work is concerned with analysing and understanding the experience of 'being in the world' in the late twentieth century; the nature of subjectivity and its relation to a sense of temporal order. Described through prosaic situations and functions, an abstract notion of 'existence' is brought to the fore. Rather than telling us how 'special' it is to be an artist, this work simply worries away at the specialness of things.

ROBYN MCKENZIE

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Contemporary Art
Magazine
and teaches
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of the Arts

seeing something wonderful

(a thought from here to there) Judith Findlay

Someone told me that this place is a wilderness, a cultural desert. For there's not much art that happens here. But someone also told me that the best sight on earth is the sky above your head. And in this place, this place being that part of earth where I live, known as the north east of Scotland (and specifically here I'm referring to that strip north of Aberdeen, from Newburgh Bar, the Sands of Forvie and Hackley Bay to Collieston to Hatton and Cruden Bay, to Buchan Ness and Peterhead to St Fergus, Rattray Head, Crimond air field and St Combs, Fraserburgh and around the tip of Kinnaird Head then to Pennan and MacDuff) – you can see a lot of sky. It's because this place is rural not urban. It's because it is so flat and spacious, and, in a way, so minimal. Things that protrude above the horizon – a church spire, a wind-sock for a private air field, a lighthouse, a radar, a silo or some sort of installation of advanced technology for farming, fishing, communications, energy or defence – are like signals of social, natural, cultural, political and economic lives. There is too, a certain quality of light – a different light to that of other places: a clearer, crisper, truer light. It helps you see things clearly. And because this strip of land is coastal the best sight on earth is also the sea.

Long roads feature here too. For driving in a fast moving car is a necessity. It is normal to cover many miles. Great distances are travelled to achieve something ordinary: visiting a friend, going to the pub, doing a bit of business, buying a pint of milk, getting a stamp and posting a letter, seeing some art. But you get used to it. For distance is a mind-set and 'near' and 'far' are relative terms. If you are used to travelling places the world is a small place. And driving, like the sky, allows you space – to think about nothing and to think about something. It helps you

see things clearly. It depends on what you focus, the interior of the car, the music or voice of the radio, the glass of the window, or the object or scene – the land, the sea or the sky – beyond, or something else entirely: a memory, a thought, a sound or a conversation. It's a form of meditation. It's like looking at an art work. Sometimes I travel to Glasgow or Edinburgh or beyond to see some art. But sometimes you can travel without going anywhere. Sometimes you can see art when it's not even there. Sometimes in a wilderness you can see something wonderful. Sometimes deserts flower.

So artists have travelled from Scotland to Australia. And perhaps they provide forms of meditation too. They describe and identify something of Scotland, even as Scotland describes and identifies them. But perhaps they also indicate another place more universal – more global – not rooted in geography but rooted instead in our thoughts and feelings. You might focus on what you see, then realise you haven't seen what you've looked at for at least five minutes. Then tuning in to the scene before you, a memory, a thought, a sound or a conversation might change what you see forever. Like a journey new scenes come and go and wipe out what came previously. Ideas come to mind. Impressions surface. Flash-backs occur. They're mulled over, pondered on, shuffled around, re-classified and forgotten again until next time. Sometimes art makes you think of something else entirely. Suddenly you encounter something that stays with you forever. Seeing something wonderful is the best sight on earth.

JUDITH FINDLAY
is a writer
based
in Scotland.

I don't know

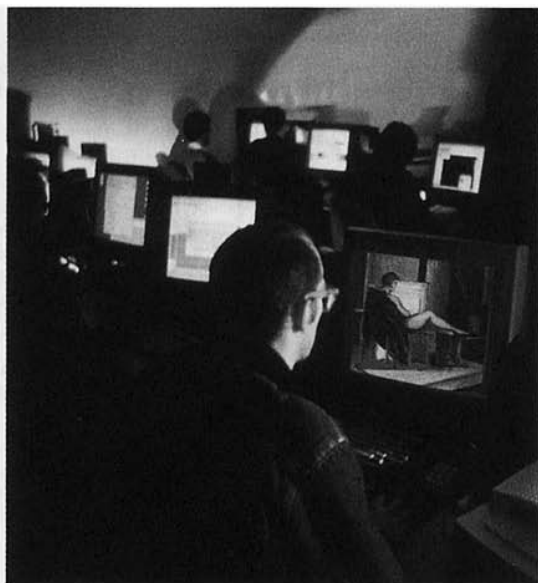
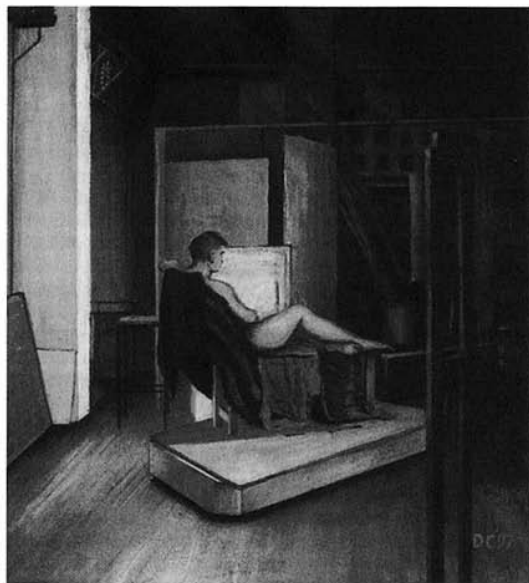
Geoff Lowe

'I don't know' is the method most people use in art. It's the opposite of premise and conclusion. If you know what you want, the trip probably isn't worth taking. 'I shoot my arrow into the air and where it lands I call my target.' (Psychotherapy cartoon from the 1970s)

'I don't know' goes with 'I don't want to not know'. When most Mother's Princes and Daddy's Whores (myself included) arrive at art school it is often with the desire to be or do something unique. It's a kind of imagined fast tracking through every class, up where the air is clean with those that understand (art). You know what others don't and this is what makes you special. But by then nobody, not even your friends or family, understand any more... (art).

By all other evidence 'everybody knows'. Popular culture, music, gossip prove it. I guess it means that 'we don't want to not know that "everybody knows" '.

GEOFF LOWE
is an artist,
co-editor of
Artfan magazine
and Director of
A Constructed
World



GLASGOW SCHOOL
OF ART
Christmas card
1997

institutions: beyond care

Pavel Büchler

The letter of invitation to write about 'Scottish institutional fabric', was longer than the response it aimed to solicit: '200-500 words' – a pretty impossible task. Brevity – not my forte at the best of times – cannot grapple with the complexity of the matter. I can think of at least 200 adjectives – from 'reactionary', 'provincial' or 'mediocre', through the plain 'indifferent' to 'radical', 'international' and 'ambitious' – which should all have a place in anything approaching a representative account. Even a simple list of institutions involved in 'independent production, artists' initiatives, art education and cultural exchange' would easily fill the allotted space. The only option is a visual metaphor. After all, a picture is still worth a thousand words.

The temptation is to say that the Scottish institutional 'fabric' resembles the Scottish tartan, with its patterns of shades and hues formed by the intersections of contrasting stripes of colour running in two directions in such a manner that they at once enhance and cancel one another. But that is both too obvious and far too specific in its historical and ideological connotations. It is also something I don't know much about and, as a stranger in Scotland, I should confine my speculation to images whose general validity is underwritten by personal experience. Here I am saved by a token of official self-perception from the one Scottish institution I can claim to know rather well. Last winter, the Glasgow School of Art produced a Christmas card adorned by a puzzling juxtaposition of two images. One, painted in a sort of grim sub-socialist-realist style, is a picture of a 'Life Class'; the other is a photograph of a 'Digital Design Studio'. The title 'Life Class' is clearly a poetic hyperbole, for the picture shows the room deserted, save for the dust in the air and a nude model precariously perched on a piece of furniture which appears suspended an inch or two above the floor like a primitive hovercraft. The impression that the model suffers from a dislocated shoulder, badly swollen thigh and grotesquely deformed feet could be explained by the presence of an abandoned easel in the foreground: it could imply that the study of anatomy is of no interest to anyone. But this isn't quite so. In the digital studio crammed with students and electronic gadgetry, and lit like a disco bar, a bespectacled man is lustfully examining the same naked lady displayed on his computer screen.

This is of course an irreverent, even malicious, interpretation of a well-intended institutional message. But, why not say it? I have my axe to grind: the author of the card, the director, never bothered to wish me a good new year on behalf of his school. Why should I care? And who does, anyway? While some junior lecturers were seen tearing the card to pieces in fits of rage, most couldn't care less for what or who represents their institution. (As "institution" is word no. 489, I'd better leave it here).

PAVEL BÜCHLER,
Artist,
was Head of the
School of Fine Art
at Glasgow School
of Art, 1992-96,
and is currently
Research Professor
in Art and Design
at Manchester
Metropolitan
University.

His first solo
exhibition in
Australia,
Blind Spot, took
place at Artspace,
Sydney, in
August 1998.

surfing the wild face of capitalism

Stephen O'Connell

STEPHEN
O'CONNELL
is a Melbourne
writer and teacher

Today, so-called 'independent' projects or artist-run initiatives play an important role in art scenes across the globe. At one level, they provide emerging artists with contexts to pursue an apprenticeship with the art world after art school. At another level, they offer alternative avenues of production to established artists, or people looking to re-invent themselves. For artists whose work is essentially installation-based, artist-run spaces provide an opportunity to showcase and sell ephemeral projects to professional curators. These projects also road test new talent for the tentative tastes of commercial art dealers. And they serve aspiring curators, administrators and art writers who are looking to build up experience and job skills.

In short, independent production has become a very functional element within the broader machinery of the art system. And this surely begs the question: Who or what are artist-run projects independent from?

The orthodox response to this question, perhaps, is to say that artist initiatives stand apart from the market and its demand for sellable products. But, far from wresting the art object from commerce, artist-run projects surf the wild face of capitalism, forging new economies and career paths in the contemporary scene. And this, for me, is the charming vitality of the artist-run scene in Melbourne. It's like a network of little dress-up boxes where artistry is not only evident in the products being exhibited or published, but in the roles and characters that are being invented by the participants. More like cargo cults than subsistence communes, the independence of these projects lies in their imaginative interventions in market forces rather than in an opposition to it.

an open letter

to whomsoever it may concern regarding: scotland - a brief and fractured introduction to the history of the period 1983-2083

Ross Sinclair

ROSS SINCLAIR
is an artist and
writer based in
Glasgow.

Thinking about the things that people forgot about because they weren't written down in history books. The year is 2083 Anno Domini and Transmission Gallery is one hundred years old today. The place is The Peoples' Republic of Scotia, a small, northern European nation with agreeably changeable weather. More than twenty years have passed since Scotland achieved its long cherished ambition, independence from England and the Crown. However, this occurred at some cost to the Scottish people...

The Path to Freedom?

At the Stirling Bridge Referendum of 2061, a handsome majority of the Scottish people decided that they wished to secede from the United Kingdom of Great Britain. There were five million or so inhabitants in this poor, damp, country, for so long under the sword of one conquering invader or another. And this populace eventually decided, once and for all, to leave the Union in order to implement a novel plan to completely re-invent the Nation in a manner never before heard of anywhere in the world. The new official name they chose for the re-invented Scotland, from those suggested, was: **Scotia - The Living History of a Small Nation**. At first glance this may sound like a strange name for a small country, newly independent after 500 years of struggle, but to explain this unprecedented move: the Scots had voted en masse to turn the whole country, and everyone in it, into the world's first national scale historical theme park. And it was to be of truly epic proportions.

In 2062, almost overnight, a big fence was built along the border with England. This was not to keep the poor Scottish people in, as you might have thought, but to keep everyone else out, because now you were going to have to pay to get in – and it wasn't going to be cheap. Most people north of Hadrian's Wall were initially very enthusiastic about this new development, as Scotland in the middle twenty-first century was suffering an horrific depression, the likes of which had not been seen since the middle ages of the previous millennium. Diseases which had lain dormant for centuries had returned with a vengeance and were killing off poor people in tens of thousands. Those who couldn't afford the simple drugs which prevented these grotesque diseases became truly outcast, living in pathetic ragged groups like the leper colonies of biblical times. Thus they were not represented on any voting rolls and therefore did not take part in the 'democratic' Stirling Bridge Referendum of 2061.¹ Officially they did not even exist. By the 2040s they had become such a problem that large walls were built round the major cities to keep them out and the people who lived inside them tried to forget about those poor wretches who were outside.

When the idea for the theme park was first mooted in the mid 2050s it fired up the Scottish peoples' imagination, galvanising them into an intense debate and direct action not witnessed for many decades. The publicity generated by these debates slowly encouraged many ex-patriots to return home. There were at least twenty million people around the world who considered themselves Scottish by ancestry, but had never actually been 'home'; this turned out to be quite fortuitous as some of these folk were very rich and brought back their fortunes with them to invest in the park. It was the first good idea anyone in Scotland had thought of for quite a while so it was no wonder it caught on so quickly. It also helped them forget about all the horror that went on outside the city walls.

At this point in the 2050s, before the park was built, the Parliamentary Monarchy of England had many problems of its own. Its coffers were much depleted after protracted wars with France and Ireland.² It simply could not afford to worry about Scotland any more, particularly since the oil had run out. England's international reputation had sunk to an all time low and it was the popularly held belief that Westminster was, in fact, quite happy to finally get rid of its troublesome and costly Northern appendage.

Most poor parts of the world were really wasted with wars and famines while diseases and bad planning had made millions of people unhappy. Everywhere had been discovered, nowhere was remote or savage any more. Scotland wasn't actually too bad in comparison with the war torn 'outside world'. Although there certainly were plenty of poor and diseased and unhappy people (mainly those living outside the city walls), there had never really been any kind of modern, technological warfare to physically mar the natural beauty of the place. When proposals for the park became public, it transpired that the outsiders (as these outcast people were known) were to be rounded up and put into hostel camps to be re-habilitated out of harm's way, up in the northern parts of the country, because now it suited the country's leaders to help them as plenty of workers would be needed for the park. There were big areas in the North of Scotland where most of the people had been thrown out in what was called The Highland Clearances which began in the nineteenth

century. They were replaced with sheep during the blockades of the Napoleonic wars because these animals were actually more profitable than people. The outsiders were to re-populate these remote areas for the benefit of the tourists, in what became known as: 'The Highland Clearances in Reverse'.³

The basic idea for **Scotia - The Living History of a Small Nation**, when it opened in 2062, was very simple. Each area of the country would adopt the look and lifestyle of a certain epoch in Scottish history. Everyone who lived in these areas would adopt the mores and manners of their designated period. Our best actors would play the great figures in our history, except they wouldn't so much play them as be them, since they never got the chance to be off set or out of costume. This should be stressed. The whole country was subsumed into the park, you couldn't escape it. Anyone else who happened to live in Scotland at the time got the chance to stay on, if they wanted. This was to reflect for the tourists, the tolerant atmosphere created by the mixture of people who originally came from elsewhere to settle in this small country. However, you couldn't really have people coming and going all the time so it was decided that employment for the lower ranks in the park would be a bit like the volunteer Armies of the twentieth century, where you signed on the dotted line and agreed to stay for something like 3 years at a time.

All Scotland's most spectacular battles and events were re-enacted daily in the hills and glens of the Highlands; tourists would flock to the most barren and remote places searching for the theme park's most authentic experiences. Thus the visitor from China or Peru could easily get a vivid impression of the whole history of our small nation in only a week or so, not to mention seeing the wonderful scenery. All the original flora and fauna were restored – complex deciduous forests filled with wolf, boar and all the other interesting animals that used to live in the place, but had eventually died out because the Scots didn't take care of them properly.

The Scottish people appeared to be quite happy in their new occupation as Real Life extras in this simulated version of history. Scotland became very successful and prosperous and everyone agreed that re-inventing itself as a theme park had been a really great idea. Everything was free for Scottish people, although the tourists paid frankly outrageous prices just to breathe the same air as the Scots. From the outside it might have seemed like a bit of an odd situation: the Scottish people were basically providing a service for these tourists while achieving just about the same standard of living as them. But the Scots were tied to this way of life in the theme park, they could never go home to somewhere real or do a normal job – it was 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Even leisure pursuits were open and available for the global tourist to gawk at. However, it was a comfortable life, and few people complained, especially the ones who had previously been forced to live outside of society for the want of a few pounds' worth of cheap drugs.

The Main Cities of the Central Belt, Edinburgh and Glasgow

The City of Edinburgh elected to represent the pre-industrial Enlightenment period of the city's history⁴, while Glasgow adopted the

post-industrial or 'Cultural Period'. This era in the history of Glasgow originally occurred during a ten year period at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, when Glasgow was briefly very popular with global tourism. New museums of art and culture were built at an extraordinary rate and on the surface everything seemed to be going very well. These new repositories of culture championed a popular kind of art which everyone was supposed to be able to access.

There was a major problem though. The educational establishments which taught people from 5 years old and upwards had, at this time in the late twentieth century, stopped telling people anything about art and culture because it couldn't get you a job in an office when you left school at 17. So, it came to the point where nobody felt they really knew anything about art and culture any more, which was a great pity as Scotland had once been a very bright country. This made the public suspicious of the people who still made art and culture – and who could blame them? This self-proclaimed 'renaissance' was advertised as providing art for the people but the problem was that the people never asked for it.

The flaw in this 'renaissance' was the approach the city fathers took to make culture more accessible to the public. They made all the culture so simplified and banal that it would appeal to everyone, even those who knew nothing about any form of cultural activity beforehand. Productions of plays which dealt with complex and difficult issues were discouraged, in favour of Busby Berkley style musical extravaganzas – everyone loved these. Visual art was reduced to greeting card designs, though painted in oils, naturally. Glaswegian literature, which was once incisive, politicised and independent, was now produced by the city itself, in defence of its own strategies. This New Glasgow Culture (as it became known) was very easy on the eye and on the ear, and provided a cosy hour or two of distraction out of the rain, and everyone – even those who stood against the imposition of this cultural equivalent of flock wallpaper – agreed that all these places of culture had lovely coffee bars.

However...

...The initial appeal and excitement of this era quickly dwindled when people began to understand that they were being patronised. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century this period was already seen by anyone who knew anything about life and culture to be truly daft. It eventually stupefied the locals by patronising them into thinking that they couldn't understand any kind of culture that you had to think about for more than ten seconds. This led to the Scottish people becoming lazy. After being fed this sickly sweet culture mulch for many years they could no longer digest any kind of solid cultural food. They faded away to mere shadows of their former, robust selves, becoming thinner and paler and lethargic. They were losing the ability to think for themselves. Internationally, New Glasgow Culture was an embarrassment.

The Trongate Affair

This period ended for good in 2013 in what became known as 'The Trongate Affair'. By this time various members of Transmission

Gallery and other independently minded cultural spaces located in the area, had successfully infiltrated over the years various committees and held numerous important positions in the local and national culture councils. From these positions they were able to undermine the whole sorry system and eventually brought the whole New Glasgow Culture crashing down around the ears of those who had been too deaf to listen to the detractors, who had foreseen this moronisation of the people.

This 'coup' was unfortunately deemed to be illegal and resulted in Transmission becoming a proscribed organisation and being forced underground. Here it flourished under the patronage of a local artist who had become very rich and famous by selling his work outside Scotland and who asked nothing in return except that the gallery continued in the way it always had. Just after the debacle of 'The Trongate Affair', the final nail in the coffin for the city fathers was the 'Purple Wednesday Crash' of 2014. Printed money became obsolete overnight, causing mayhem and revolt across the globe, particularly from those who didn't have credit cards and were therefore excluded from the new system. Since many people in Scotland still lived a hand to mouth existence this was, indeed, bad news for the city fathers. It was all over for them. New Glasgow Culture has gone for good (or so everyone thought).

The Irony

So, ironically, although the period of New Glasgow Culture is now wholly discredited, and has in fact become an aphorism to describe the banalisation of culture, it is this period the new city fathers chose to represent in *Scotia - The Living History of a Small Nation*, fifty years after the debacle itself. This was simply because it was the period that had garnered the most global media attention and everyone remembered it, for better or worse. Some say there's no such thing as bad publicity, but I'm not so sure.

Epilogue

Thus, as it was in Real Life, now it is in the theme park. Transmission is still a proscribed organisation but continues to flourish to this day, presenting thoughtful, challenging exhibitions in temporary, out of the way spaces. Some aspects of its exhibition structure resemble the popular rave culture of the late twentieth century, where you hear of a new exhibition⁵ from a complex grapevine of friends and acquaintances. People gather illegally on their days off from working in the theme park⁶, arranging to meet at a particular ferry terminal somewhere, desperate to see something new and real and engaging. For although the park is fascinating to the tourists, it is, of course, very, very boring for those who live and work there.

Transmission events and exhibitions have become somewhat vogueish with the more intrepid tourists who vie with each other over the most obscure and exciting shows they have seen, but it is mainly the indigenous population who enjoy them. Unfortunately these exhibitions get closed down with great rapidity as they are illegal. Records are always kept in the old book form and these get distributed widely although they are banned and destroyed if found. Sometimes these books are produced in such a way as to look like a relatively

innocuous text or history book, so they can be surreptitiously inserted into public library collections. A strategy currently popular is to place these books into public collections of times gone by, using a standard linear time shift document transferral. Thus the books and information of the future are already in circulation decades before the actual events described have happened.

If you hadn't guessed already, this is how you are able to read this history now, almost one hundred years early. This document transferral technique usually doesn't change much of the course of history because the future always seems too fantastic to believe before it actually happens. I mean, who would have believed the incredible history of the twentieth century if you'd foretold it in 1899? Thus it is with the twenty-first and twentieth centuries. So let us take a moment to join together, raise a glass and make a toast to Transmission. Happy hundredth birthday, here's to the future...

To be continued...

This text was
originally written
for the 10th anniversary
of Transmission
Gallery in Glasgow.
It is reproduced
from the catalogue
Ross Sinclair: Real Life,
Centre for Contemporary
Arts, Glasgow, 1997.

NOTES

- 1 These poor disenfranchised people may not have had the vote in any election but they didn't have to pay tax either.
- 2 Ireland had become very rich in the first decades of the twenty-first century with the discovery of certain natural elements found only in its indigenous peat bogs which proved to be a panacea for many cancer based illnesses.
- 3 While the English were always willing to encourage anything that would de-stabilise Scotland, it should be pointed out that in this respect the Scots have more often than not been their own worst enemies. The Highland Clearances were just as much the fault of the money grabbing Scots landowners as the English. When the political and economic situation changed many years later, most of these folk who'd left never went back because they'd gone far away to Ireland or the Americas or to the cities in the Lowlands of Scotland. Wherever they went they had got used to it and probably quite liked it and forgot about Scotland except in a vague romantic way, based more on the Hollywood movies of the time than anything they actually remembered, as they probably hadn't been back home for 150 years. So most of them just stayed wherever they ended up. Better the devil you know, they thought – until they heard about the park that is...
- 4 This involved the reconstruction of the Royal Mile, which was completely destroyed by the Disney Castle riots of 2025.
- 5 These exhibitions are usually in the remoter parts of the Highlands or on uninhabited islands.
- 6 'Illegally' because no-one is ever supposed to be seen 'out of character'.

Strangely Familiar

AUSTRALIAN CENTRE
FOR CONTEMPORARY ART
29 August – 4 October 1998

MELBOURNE Nicola Loder,
Leslie Eastman, Andy
Thomson and Daniel von
Sturmer

SCOTLAND Matthew Dalziel
and Louise Scullion

CURATOR Clare Williamson

just a moment

Clare Williamson

There's not much in life these days that makes us stop and look around us. Engaged in so many daily schedules and rhythms, urgencies and deadlines, to experience any departure from this continuum and to consider a particular moment is rare. Within this environment, artists such as those in *Strangely Familiar* are exploring the possibilities of art in relation to its own 'objectness' and to life beyond. By working with the image, whether on a flat plane or as an installation to be encountered both visually and physically, these artists remind those who witness their work that, ironically, the more visually-based our culture has become, the less we often actually 'see'. And that a visual consideration of the small details and moments of contemporary life can facilitate much in terms of understanding the complexities and interrelatedness of nature, society and being human at the end of this millennium.

The work in this exhibition has what Judith Findlay has coined 'followability', an ability to take the viewer somewhere, whether it be to a strange and unknown place or to their own backyard.¹

The destination is determined by the viewer, by his or her own interpretation, experience and response. Clues and suggestions are given but there is no set map or end point. The effectiveness of much of the work here lies in its success in only slightly altering what a viewer would expect to see, whether it be the scale or location of a building in a landscape, the speed at which smoke rises, or the view through an apparently solid wall. These are things that we know, or at least that we think we know until we look a little more closely. '...by presenting objects and things that we think we know, these works pursue a line which dares art to come close to being indistinguishable from life where the artist might even disappear'.²

The Way Stations continues and extends Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion's ongoing explorations of the natural and constructed environment. Working in the north east of Scotland, they use the surrounding landscapes and architecture both as their studio and as their subject matter. The concern of their work, however, is universal, rather than geographically specific, and looks at how our relationship to the Earth is continually changing due to various factors such as economics, science, philosophy and religion. In this new body of work, seven large photographs on vinyl depict a range of structures in the landscape – or do they? Dalziel and Scullion have actually manufactured these images, beginning with the construction of detailed models which are then situated and photographed within various settings. The images have been made to look like particular places on Earth, some suggesting very hot desert regions, others cold northern type landscapes. The structures or buildings which appear in each image, act as catalysts to look afresh at the locations themselves. Dalziel and Scullion explain:

These man-made objects become the signifier of where nature and culture intersect. The different objects hint at the diverse ways we utilise the environment, they reflect the meanings and codes through which we transform nature, at the point at which it becomes: a 'breathtaking view', a 'conservation area', a 'relaxing retreat', a 'strategic military target', an 'unmissable investment opportunity', etc.³

Dalziel and Scullion do not see a conflict between nature and the presence of humans but rather that the two now inform each other to create one experience. This body of work extends previous projects which also explored the 'containment' of nature such as *The Gifted Child*, in which video images of a rough sea were juxtaposed with those of a synchronised swimmer in an indoor pool. By disrupting the surface of what initially appears in these photographs, the images in *The Way Stations* also relate to earlier projects such as *The Horn*, a monumental and elegant structure located near a busy motorway which broadcast sounds – poetry, music, voices – to the passing traffic, enabling travellers '... to break out of the competitive struggle and (providing) an impetus to take time for reflection and contemplation.'⁴

Like Dalziel and Scullion, Leslie Eastman, Andy Thomson and Daniel von Sturmer work in collaboration, but also maintain independent practices. By working together to produce site-specific video and photographic installations, they find that the merging of their practices relates to their interests in collapsing boundaries between the gallery space and the surrounding environment, the physical and the virtual. *Cube*, created for the ACCA gallery space, addresses the mediation of experience and

proposes a space which 'facilitates the viewer in perceiving themselves perceiving.'⁵ A large white cube stands within the gallery space. Onto each surface of this cube (and visible from both within and without) are projected moving images of the natural and urban environment which lies beyond the walls of ACCA, as though this translucent white cube is a giant receptor of visual stimuli within its radius.

Using video projection, ambient sound, time delay and camera obscura, Eastman, Thomson and von Sturmer create an environment which is at the same time instantly recognisable and curiously unsettling. Outside is confused with inside, with the viewer somehow feeling suspended in between. As Tanya Eccleston has described (of an earlier project by this group) 'these artists choose to perforate, make permeable and mutable a pictorial sense by rending it open to the passage of time, of bodies, and a particular kind of attention.'⁶ By inserting camera obscura lenses into windows, some of which have been covered over for more than ten years, they bring in views of the outside world which have either been unknowable or have not been 'seen' by ACCA's artgoing audience. By so doing, these artists remind us of the judgements that we constantly make when receiving visual information and our categorisations of it as either artistic and therefore to be noted, or not. It is these most peripheral, impermanent and overlooked spaces and moments which hold the greatest interest for the artists here.

Nicola Loder also works with the video image in space and with the familiar as strange. Within a small square gallery, projected images leap across reflective screens of perspex and aluminium. Rather than act as receptacles for images or as dividers of

space, Loder's screens act as architectural disruption, fragmenting and distorting the images and the space within the gallery. By utilising different camera speeds and by blurring macro and micro, she further engages her viewers in acts of discovery, surprise and recognition. Loder works across a range of images such as a woman turning or a man falling, or slow motion footage of smoke rising. At the same time, in ACCA's hallway gallery, thirteen small LCD video monitors each depict the image of a person meditating.

A sense of duality pervades Nicola Loder's work, of the small and the quiet against the monumental and dramatic, of light and dark, of the comfortable against the disturbing, of time and space. This project extends her ongoing exploration of the tensions between opposites, of the nature of human existence as simultaneously banal and exhilarating. Like the other artists in *Strangely Familiar*, Loder invites contemplation of the nature of human existence in a time marked by technological change and by the local in relation to the global, the moment in relation to the momentous.

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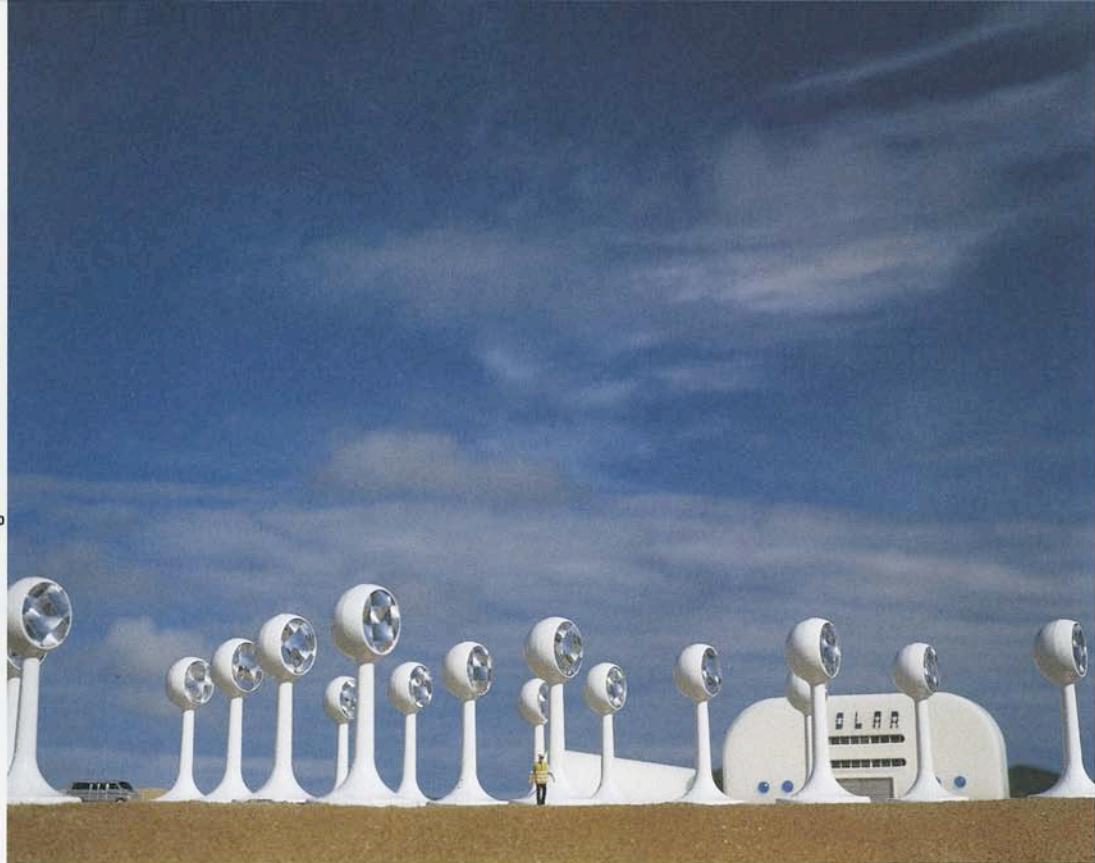
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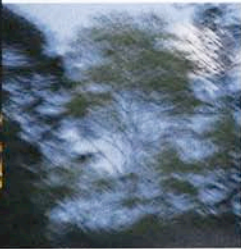
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**DALZIEL AND
SCULLION**
Energy
from
The Way
Stations
1998





LESLIE EASTMAN,
ANDY THOMSON,
DANIEL VON
STURMER
Cube
1998

NICOLA LODER
Untitled
1998



evening star