

# Meltwater Channel – Dalziel and Scullion’s Juxtapositionals

At the forefront of contemporary Scottish art practice, **Louise Scullion** and **Matthew Dalziel** have redefined the notion of environmental art, relating it to the signs of the nineties: media, installation, critical theory and technological exploration. In so doing the duo have introduced a new turning in a field hitherto historically ambivalent and ill at ease with current theory-led art orthodoxy.

Visit Scotland from the south of England and the English foreigner could come away with the impression that Scotland is primarily land, worked land in the south of the country to be sure, but a place where city and industry are held in check at the bidding of geography. The presence of mountains, chain after chain, dominates, ensuring urban culture is constrained from spreading beyond the first few footholds. Conurbations of size: Dundee, Perth, Stirling, swiftly recede into fields and mid-range hillsides. Even from the metropolis of Edinburgh and Glasgow the countryside quickly surrounds. Go north and a deeply rural, spacious and thinly populated Highlands becomes the main human geographical characteristic. This Highlands’ drama and relative remoteness has been an enduring attraction to ecological artists in search of an accessible other, so much so that some end up moving there for the assumed peace of the northern wilds. Composer Peter Maxwell Davies moved to the Shetlands for the quality of silence, and the sculptor Steve Dilworth to the Hebrides for a similar sense of peace and remoteness.

Still, as everywhere, Scotland’s primary population movement has been into the city, towards the urban. What has this meant for contemporary art? It is interesting that the country’s most recent big art movement emerged out of Glasgow School of Art’s department of Environmental Art in the early nineties, yet looks nothing like any environmental art practice before it, but rather a species of nineties’ smart art for north of the border; cross-hybridising conceptual, performance and installation all in one. At the time, what the department also emphasised was grounding in critical and post-theory, an openness to cross fertilisation with other media, and exposure to contextual practice. The result was what is described these days as the ‘Glasgow miracle’; a generation of Scottish artists who brought a new impetus to redefining environmental art, framing it alongside, or perhaps within, the language of its brasher contemporary Britart, down south. The adherence to critical discourse came from the tutelage of David

Harding, the man who originated the Environmental Art course. The students who went on to levels of recognition less present in subsequent classes include Clare Barclay, Ross Sinclair, Douglas Gordon, Christine Borland, Graham Fagan – and Louise Scullion, one half of Dalziel and Scullion. By being thrown together in an apparently chaotic course these artist-students built up a close bond and sense of mutual support, developed an internal aesthetic which enabled them to maintain the momentum once they’d graduated, and to develop a distinctive, recognisable identity. The Environmental Art Course also bequeathed an activist energy which continues to feed the artistic focus of their chosen media, supporting a process of investigation rather than a path to financial riches.

Maybe it is not surprising, but the concerns of this disparate group weren’t explicitly environmental. Rather, both urban and media elements jockeyed in their scheme of things. Unlike the Land Artists, they did not travel light and take off into the Munros (the group of Scottish mountains over 1000 metres in height), but appeared to prefer the metaphysical companionship of a French theoretician or two. What did happen, however, was the sense that a distinctive new territory for environmental art was on the scene, just at a time when the future of environmental art seemed floundering in exhaustion.

An early post-student show was a touring exhibition entitled *Windfall*, in 1991, which at its third venue, after launches in London’s Hyde Park and Barcelona respectively, came home to Glasgow’s artist-run gallery, Transmission. *Windfall 91* garnered international attention, propelling some of the ‘Glasgow miracle’ artists, Barclay and Borland, and particularly Gordon, into the art limelight. Glasgow, far from the art entrepôts of London, Berlin or New York, became a beacon at the periphery, redefining the nature of the edge.

Over twelve years later this is all pretty distant history. Many of these early artists are established figures in Scotland and internationally. What didn’t materialise in



Drift from the Home exhibition

the intervening decade as fully as may have been anticipated was an explicit, sharply focused environmental art. The exception here is the partnership-couple, Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion, who are today Scotland’s highest profile environmental artists. Although only Scullion was part of the original Glasgow scene (Dalziel studied Fine Art at Dundee Art College before completing an MA at Glasgow, where the artists’ paths first crossed) they can be said to represent most transparently Glasgow School of Art’s environmental impulse. In the mid-nineties, in a literal move away from the centre, the pair transplanted themselves to the village of St Coombs, a north-eastern shore fishing port, bringing with them a host of ideas and approaches picked up from years in higher education seminars. Although times have changed, Dalziel and Scullion continue to co-occupy an unique conjunction between the heady post-eighties days of art theory at its zenith; the application of a variety of mixed media, project by particular project; and the new sensibility of one of the few genuinely environmental

artists’ names which have emerged in national art visibility in the last decade. While Dalziel and Scullion’s identity seems to have drawn closer to a green hue, even though in stark contrast to what is generally perceived as green art, the Glasgow art school contemporaries appear more easily placed within the mainstream art frame, less differentiated from the mainstream conversation of the contemporary British art scenes.

Their coastal community life changed when, three years ago, Dalziel and Scullion were offered a deal from the University of Dundee that was probably impossible to refuse; they were invited to work separately within the University, and to be supported in exchange for teaching responsibilities and garnering kudos for the University. For Dalziel and Scullion this has meant a move south to the comparatively fast life and urban amenities of living a short journey from Dundee. However, asked today whether he considers himself urban or rural, Matthew Dalziel says, ‘I’m probably more rural. I miss the sea and the solitude of the country.’