



RETRACTING

For five months, large PVC banners dangled from the Glasgow Museum of Modern Art's neo-classical entrance advertising an exhibition by the Dutch artist Marlie Mul. Intended as the first in a series of major exhibitions at Glasgow's flagship publicly funded space, Mul's exhibition was supported by the Henry Moore Foundation and the Mondriaan Fund. Stamped across the tasteful, monochrome banner were large, blunt red letters marking the show *CANCELLED*.

On entering the gallery, the description of the exhibition read:

This would have been Marlie Mul's first exhibition in Scotland, however after careful consideration the artist has cancelled the exhibition.

There is no exhibition.

Except for a series of billboard posters filling GoMA's arched windows, the main space was entirely empty. Mul's posters felt austere despite their light, washy brushstrokes and floppy shapes, which represented a miniature model of Gallery 1. Once again, in stark contrast to the blanched images, diagonal, fire-engine red letters announced the show was *CANCELLED*.

The final paragraph of this wall text solicited proposals from members of the public for activities and events to be held

in the gallery. Resonant with early Conceptual works such as Robert Barry's 1969 work *During the exhibition the gallery will be closed*¹ and Maria Eichhorn's recent work *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours* at Chisenhale, where the artist requested that the gallery staff withdraw their labour for the duration of the exhibition,² GoMA's press communications described the show as an "amazing opportunity" and "implicit critique of what is displayed within museums and galleries".³

Mul's previous works are by and large playful, irreverent sculptural installations; a recent solo show at Vilma Gold gallery in London included an immersive installation of caveman clubs combined with cartoon-like nicotine patches printed onto Plexiglass panels. Similarly, the brilliantly titled *Stop Being So Attractive I Can't Get Anything Done* at Autocenter, Berlin, included digital drawings on silk of smoking cartoon foetuses, alongside a series of metal sculptures with dog-ends stuffed into various crevices. In light of these earlier works, Mul's exhibition at GoMA seemed markedly out of character.

The branding of Mul's cancelled exhibition was reminiscent of Glasgow City Council's recent initiative to crack down on illegal flyposting. In order to deter the placement of "eye-sore" adverts for gigs, club nights and other cultural activities in the city centre, cancelled stickers were pasted over posters. In conversation with the artist, it emerged that this reference was intentional, and, indeed, that the decision to cancel the exhibition at GoMA was not merely a gesture intended to critique an art object's use-value via the traditional post-Conceptual avenues. After all, if this is the case, why bother with the posters?

It will perhaps not be surprising to many Glasgow-based artists and cultural workers that the decision to cancel the exhibition was largely driven by the commissioning approach of Glasgow Life—the council subsidiary responsible for cultural programming.

- 1 See Michael H. Miller, "Gallery? What Gallery? Robert Barry Masterpiece Reprised in New York", *Observer*, 06/06/2011.
- 2 See Chisenhale Gallery online archive, Maria Eichhorn, *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, 23 April–29 May 2016.
- 3 "Glasgow gallery left empty for 'cancelled' exhibition", BBC Scotland, 25/05/2017.

Mul found she was caught in a labyrinth of no-go areas, tight, unclear budgeting and short notice periods, resulting in her numerous proposals for new work being rejected. With regard to the show's relationship to Glasgow City Council's "cancelled" sticker initiative, the inadvertent suppression of the council's own sanctioned cultural activity seems cruelly ironic.

RE-STRUCTURING

Glasgow City Council (GCC) policy has fallen foul of the city's artistic community several times before. In 1990, Jonathan Monk, then a student at Glasgow School of Art, prophesied the council's modern-day anti-fly-posting initiative by placing "cancelled" notices over 1990 European City of Culture events advertising. Similarly, the artist Ross Sinclair pasted up posters reading "Capital of Culture" and "Culture of Capital" as a critique of the excessive emphasis on profit many artists felt the City of Culture title promoted.⁴ Over a decade later, between 2008 and 2011 *Variant* magazine published Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt's research on the founding of Glasgow Life.⁵ This germinal series of papers validated many artists' anxieties around the City of Culture initiative, and continues to be acutely relevant.

Beneath the veneer of streamlining and financial "sustainability", Glasgow Life (or Culture and Sport Glasgow, as it was first dubbed) was created to encourage private investment in the city's culture and leisure services, thus improving their quality and securing their future. Gordon Nesbitt picked apart the formation of GCC's arm's-length cultural outfit, demonstrating how the composition of the staff, board, aims and objectives signalled the subordination of culture to capital. Damning reports on the management's personal financial interests⁶ and disregard for even the most mainstream artistic practices⁷ painted a bleak picture of GCC's restructuring project.

- 4 These works and the conditions surrounding them are discussed in Sarah Lowndes, 2016, *The DIY Movement in Art, Music and Publishing: Subjugated Knowledge*, London: Routledge.
- 5 Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt, "The New Bohemia" and "Glasgow Life or Death" in *Variant*, issues 32 & 41
- 6 Gordon Nesbitt describes on p. 2 of her essay "The New Bohemia" how the decision-making around staging a major, touring Glasgow Boys exhibition in 2010 would boost the value of the chair of the board's personal art collection.
- 7 Again, in "The New Bohemia" Gordon Nesbitt relays the following remarks from Bridget McConnell, the executive director of Glasgow Life: "Writing in 1997—the year Glasgow-based artist Christine Borland was nominated for the Turner Prize, with her contemporary, Douglas Gordon, having won the prestigious prize the previous year—McConnell confined her appraisal of visual art successes in Scotland to an earlier generation of painters, misspelling John Bellany's name and merging Peter Howson's with that of Ken Currie to commend 'the internationally successful Belamey, Campbell and Howie'."

Perhaps the policy most pertinent here is Glasgow Life's emphasis on increasing cultural tourism. Gordon Nesbitt describes how money was funnelled towards projects that would encourage elite international tourism, focused on gentrifying the city centre at the expense of local communities, artistic or otherwise. For example, the 2010 Venues Review proposed the closure of several recreation and community centres in some of the city's poorest wards—a process from which tourist-friendly venues were immune.⁸ To give a further example that pertains to the artistic community specifically, after the completion of the Trongate 103 art centre in 2009, the eight art organisations housed in the building—including Transmission Gallery—were given five-year leases, after which their future was uncertain.⁹

Much of what was prophesied in this series of articles has come to pass. Indeed, Transmission were forced to endlessly wrangle with the privately run City Property to secure their place on King Street. Now, after their removal from Creative Scotland's portfolio of regularly funded organisations, Transmission's position in the Merchant City becomes yet more precarious. As indicated by the current committee's statement, it would seem that Creative Scotland does not see artistic activity in its "active, unrefined, ungentrified forms as being valuable".¹⁰ Equally, Glasgow Life's continual losses, due to the lack of private donations that were originally forecast, remain a threat to the city's cultural vitality. Currently, Glasgow City Council at large is attempting to make £165 million in savings, which is no mean feat for one of the city's largest employers.

As a result, the council's perpetual state of re-structuring has not only jeopardised the future of various public services, but has also left voids in management frameworks. Since her departure for the Baltic, Gateshead, in 2015, former GCC head of arts and Tramway artistic director Sarah Munro has not been replaced.

8 The CSG Private and Confidential Venues Review was part of a budget and services planning report submitted to the Culture and Sport Glasgow Board in January 2010. The report detailed £1.196 million worth of cuts to venues managed by CSG. The report is discussed in more detail on p. 18 of "Glasgow Life or Death".
9 The future of tenants at Trongate 103 is discussed on p. 7 of "The New Bohemia", with a citation referring to a GCC webpage, which has since been removed.
10 Over the last two years or so, Transmission have returned to the original purpose set out in its founding constitution to support underrepresented art practices. As a result, Transmission has undergone a radical process of decolonialisation, developing a progressive programme focused on issues of race, sexuality and gender. For the current committee's complete statement after the Creative Scotland RFO decision, see <http://bit.ly/2E3eb3A>

Other senior curatorial staff have been appointed, but none whose role is as comprehensive. Consequently, a key mediator between curatorial staff and senior management has been lost, leaving the support structure around the smooth delivery of exhibitions all at sea—as demonstrated by Mul's experience.

In light of this, GoMA's Gallery 1 is effectively held ransom by Mul's cancellation; the insertion of the absolute minimum of art work, in order to block the council from hurriedly throwing together an alternative exhibition makes visible the deep cracks in the business-oriented approach, insufficient support for artists and a lack of care for their constituents, even in their most commercially-viable, tourist-friendly venues. What's depressing—as has been the case with so many disasters not only in the field of arts and culture, but the welfare state at large—is that it took the aesthetics of radical failure to bring this all to a head.

RE-PURPOSING

Upon leaving Glasgow, Mul invited GoMA to do whatever they liked with the space. Indeed, the museum's initiative for the public to activate the space is one of a multitude of bitter ironies in the series of events. Like the apparition of some manacle-clanking "Ghost of Public Service Cuts Past", the museum's transformation into a gargantuan community centre in the face of Glasgow Life's closures felt almost vengeful. Whether or not this would elicit a wake-up call at the council—or at least bring some people to GoMA who'd never been before—remained to be seen. As affirmed by the writer and artist Lauren Velvick in her optimistic review of the show in the British art magazine *Art Monthly*,¹¹ it felt certain that the measure of the project's success would ultimately be its collateral events and aftermath.

11 Lauren Velvick, 2017, "Marlie Mul: This exhibition is cancelled", *Art Monthly*, issue 408, pp. 35-6.

GoMA set a number of terms and conditions around holding an event in Gallery 1. For instance, any political content was prohibited. Furthermore, the events had to be self-contained; no staff, budget or resources were available. Equally, events were under no circumstances allowed to solicit financial contributions or donations.¹² Several rather predictable activities ensued: mass yoga; kid's drawing workshops; a self-initiated exhibition of oil paintings. Some more obscure events also took place, with titles like "The Thing About Funerals Is" and "Burst Baw", whose content is difficult to decipher.¹³

It's extremely tempting to take the dreich view that an extended programme of exercise classes, mandolin playing and musical chairs represents little more than a crystallisation of the mediocrity that permeates so many public institutions. Although admittedly the offer of free, accessible public space is an admirable one, the exhibition's temporary status only draws attention to the fact that these facilities aren't available elsewhere — albeit with a forgiving "socially engaged" sheen. Furthermore, inviting the public to programme for themselves without any budget or resources signals the continued, relentless extraction of value from voluntary workers, in a cultural economy already largely founded on free labour. It is perhaps this pervasive attitude that prompted the management at Glasgow Life to show remarkably little resistance to Mul's cancellation proposal — after all, it's what so much of the city's cultural landscape is built on.

However, this is a broad, bleak stroke. There were in fact some interesting, pertinent events held in the space that validate Velvick's positive outlook. For instance, events hosted by Amnesty International, a workshop proposed by an eight-year-old and an evening of music hosted by Bass Warrior Sound System represented imagination and diversity that is often overlooked by Glasgow's mainstream museums. According to

¹² Information obtained from GoMA's online form.

¹³ Information obtained from a complete inventory of events and activities in Gallery 1, supplied by GoMA staff.

a member of staff, to the casual observer it would seem that people who wouldn't usually visit the museum were using GoMA's main space.

But therein lies a spanner in an already creaky works — the fact that GoMA staff could only rely on cursory observation to quantify the success of the project. Staff members commented that despite the call-out's refusal to provide any personnel, scheduling and managing events was a full-time job, supplementary to already full-time workloads. Furthermore, GoMA simply did not have the capacity or budget to task someone with effectively analysing the impact of the project, demonstrating the diffusion of Glasgow Life's perennial cutbacks to their flagship, tourist-friendly establishments.

As a result, there is unlikely to be meaningful feedback to the management about the project's successes, failures and complications. Despite the debate sparked in the art world, as far as Glasgow Life is concerned, it seems increasingly unlikely that the events will prompt any self-reflection.

RECKONING

It's a tough line to take, but if it were up to me, I would have insisted it was left empty. Dry? Arrogant? Ungenerous? Certainly.¹⁴ But these are perhaps some adjectives that could be applied to the 2010 Venues Review. I absolutely agree that the efforts by GoMA staff and the artist were completely sincere — and certainly do draw attention to issues surrounding accessible public space. However, there's a distinct aftertaste of damage control. A large part of me would have liked to witness the tabloid backlash surrounding a stark, unapologetic void, and looked on with glee as council management-types were ritually dragged.

¹⁴ Words used in Lauren Velvick's review to describe the expectations surrounding projects such as this.

But this nihilistic perspective is completely reliant on existing in a parallel universe where the conservative press would have had the insight to identify the nuances of the situation. Instead of reporting around austerity, mismanagement and under-resourcing, some splash along the lines of "Look at what these lazy worthless artists are doing with public money" would have been inevitable. In light of the realities of the wider political landscape we operate in, the curatorial staff at GoMA made the best of a bad situation; they attempted to protect the museum, protect the artist, and fend off the wolves.



