

Dialogue

A conversation about the work and practice of sculptor Bill Scott

The following is taken from a conversation, facilitated by The Bill Scott Estate, between **John Hunter** (Lecturer, Shetland College), **Alan Holligan** (Lecturer, Edinburgh College), **Stuart Bennett** (Senior Lecturer & Lauriston Campus Project Champion, Edinburgh College of Art) and **Ewan Robertson** (Lecturer, Sculpture, Edinburgh College of Art). All four artists and lecturers were students of Scott's at Edinburgh College of Art at different times between 1982 and 1996, and as a result, this presents personal reflections and memories of time spent with him over these years.

The conversation was recorded at Edinburgh College of Art on 20 February 2020 as part of the Estate's work to develop new perspectives and opinions on Scott's practice and influence as an artist/teacher. This edited version of the conversation is presented here with permission of the artists.

JH: You could say his art, his sculpture, was his organised mind. It gave him that ability to be who he was. I don't think he liked to rest. He always wanted to find something fresh. And in a way what he made still looks like it's just been made. He was always questioning, and that desire to find things out kept him youthful, always looking and seeing what was going on. He was interested in talking about such broad subjects. Most of the time he was remarkably excited by other people's ideas! He always looked genuinely excited and really into it, I think it kept him youthful. It was just a great positive way to look at stuff.

AH: Yeah, I think he had an appetite for life. There was a sense of continuous dialogue too. The 'trying to find things out' was constant. Or putting other people together, you know, "You go and speak to..." or, "Have you met...?". It was a kind of physical 'making things happen' through conversation for him.

SB: It's interesting how his work has dialogue, it has a social aspect to it. It's seen in the round, and it makes you think about

how he operated in that way too. He was always open, and very willing to see things differently, but he still maintained a particular focus or perspective.

ER: I think he had so many interests. He gave you a sense of what was possible. There are so many distractions in the world that you can plug into - domino competitions, asteroids approaching earth, anything! He fed his curiosity. I think any artist has that drive, but he was able to bring it back to the human, to see himself, or an individual, as a human, with potential. It's in his own work and the narrative in the pieces, that question of what it is to be a human, and be present, or even to have thoughts.

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AH: There was also that sharing, egalitarian aspect of him too. What motivated that? It seemed to just be a passion for the conversation, the experience. Inquisitiveness!

SB: Bill instilled in me a sense that being an artist was more than just having some sort of autonomy over material and creating some formal work. It was actually about being a human being, and how you operated as a human being and as an artist in tandem. Those things, certainly at that time, weren't really being taught by other people I was in contact with.

JH: You got a sense of this social and private man, and his personality came through his work. He talked about external architecture, landscapes and how the individual and the group interact.

AH: I don't associate him with ambition, but I think he was ambitious for the things, the life around him. He was ambitious for his students. It wasn't about him, it was about how he could affect our, or others' ambitions, and I think that's a rare quality. I've only come across that in two or three individuals you know, as teachers or mentors. Someone who says "What can I do to help?", "How can I enable?". That is what he was - he was a

facilitator, an enabler.

ER: I don't know if he consciously observed it, but I think there was a lot of poetry in Bill and his outlook. He just liked the beauty of the world, all the craziness of it. I remember him saying he'd seen this film, I think in Paris - it was Andrei Rublev, the Tarkovsky film. I saw it years later and I could see how he was so fascinated by it, because it was like virtual, visual poetry.

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JH: I don't think he liked to rest. He always wanted to find something fresh, and in a way, his work still looks like it's just been made. I think the titles are quite interesting, they often have more than one meaning. There can be something staged, or theatrical about the pieces, but I think his personality comes through, his outlook on life and the situations in life he wanted to talk about. Although there wasn't any performance about Bill. He could hold the centre of a group of folk and quite happily keep a conversation on its toes, but his interests would catch you, and surprise you. That sense of humour, God, I spent a lot of time laughing with him too.

SB: He was always looking beyond 'the four walls' of the College, the RSA, or Scotland too. I think if he was still with us, he'd be dismayed at what's happened, because he thought very much as a European. And he enjoyed that freedom of movement and the sense we were connected, that connection across the water.

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ER: It's fortuitous the Sculpture School has always been a certain size in terms of the number of students per year. I think Bill saw the studio dynamic as a useful thing - whether it was an experiment or not, mixing up all the years I don't know, but it was a really useful way to further learning.

AH: Other [teachers] were focused on studio practice and 'being in the studio'. "Have you made ten of those yet? Have you turned it upside down?". Bill had a different headspace. His questions were "Have you been to see...?", "Have you considered...?" or, "Have you been out of the studio yet?!" It was "Don't worry about going down to London. Go to Paris, go to Düsseldorf, go to Cologne! Just get travelling and see what's ahead of you, not what's behind you, or around you right now". That was absolutely crucial for me.

SB: Or allowing you to realise that it's okay not to know what you're doing! It gave you a sense of self-realisation, it gave you confidence. I think Bill had confidence in his students, that the burden of what they were experiencing would pay off at some point later on. He didn't need to be satisfied immediately by them making a form or getting an 'A' or a first-class degree. He was much more interested in those embers that would fire up later on and create another experience for other people.

AH: The 'slow burn', that definitely comes from Bill. That you don't need immediate results, you need the correct results. Or good results - and they can take a bit of time. He had a patience in him in terms of working within an institution. He had an ability to

take certain people with him in terms of ideas. The change he affected at the Sculpture Workshop in terms of provision for sculpture was huge, and it was a slow burn.

ER: He liked a 'circuitous route'! But the circuitous route always got you to an interesting place, and it would knock the formality out of the situation. I mean the studios weren't formal - they were messy environments, and it helped to get to the core of what you were doing. I think one of the things that was interesting about Bill was he was fuelled by ideas. Of course, he had his own practice and a set of things he was always thinking about, but in terms of the teaching he was excited about things that were going on at that time, or new ideas that the students would come up with - new materials or juxtapositions, or just trying to do new things.

"I don't think he liked to rest. He always wanted to find something fresh. And in a way, his work still looks like it's just been made." JH

SB: When I was a postgraduate, he made all these opportunities, connections. I never really thought at the time that he was looking out for me, or us. I'm not entirely sure he was! I think it was just a thing that he did.

AH: Bill was able to identify people we should speak to, and he brought them in to the College. He recognised that if the permanent skills weren't there, he knew someone who could come in and do a week's work with you, who was going to add to what we needed right then. I think that's something we've probably all tried to do - to look outside of the familiar and bring that into our teaching.

SB: Bill led from the front foot as an artist who taught, rather than someone who was reliant on the institution. That's something I've always taken from him.

AH: A lot of people taught as 'the Institution'. I don't think Bill really saw it as that, it always felt more equal with Bill.

SB: And it was about more than making objects for him – it was about how you operated as a social being. He was interested in preparing us all for a social role, that was really critical for him from the get-go. I think of that all the time, because otherwise I probably wouldn't be able to do what I do, or what I've done, without framing it in that way.

AH: I wonder if he was conscious of, or was pre-empting what was going to happen in terms of art practice? Either way it was pretty forward thinking – that idea of artists having some kind of role other than the production of an artwork that goes in a gallery.

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SB: The question about change is an interesting one because, if you look at the institutions he was involved with, can you point a finger at any one thing Bill did?

It's quite difficult. But what flowed from his time there, into Edinburgh, Scotland, Europe and the networks that were created, those were influences that spiralled from him. So, the change was more networked than strategic. I think that's important – when institutions are constantly in flux, constantly changing, they're looking to particular individuals to implement change. And they need networks where people have a joint sensibility about what they're trying to achieve. Bill was able to do that.

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SB: Bill was very involved in [the RSA] and tried to shift it. I think he had an influence in contemporising it and making it think of itself as being more diverse. He was also very open to change. I remember meeting him when the college was being integrated with the university. He was positive about it, which was a different view to some of his peers at the time. Bill was

interested in the opportunities within the University, to look outwards and beyond the College.

AH: If you walk into the foyer of the Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop there's a piece of his right in front of you. It's in dialogue with the building. There's a physical dialogue going on, and an intellectual one – within the work itself where all the different elements speak to each other, and between the work and the building.

JH: I suppose you've got to mention the Sculpture Workshop, it's got his name on it – that's pretty amazing. [ESW] took a long time to come about – from a few students hanging about in the pub thinking “What do we do?”, and folk like Bill saying “You've got to get yourselves going, set something up”.

ER: Bill had a vision for himself, and for teaching, or the art scene in Edinburgh, that was for how things *could be*. He didn't think you needed to know the minutiae or the specifics – you just need to know there's something promising ahead to get you through the obstacles.



L-R: Ewan Robertson, Alan Holligan, Stuart Bennett and John Hunter, 20 February 2020, Edinburgh College of Art.