

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Robert Gordon University		
Unit of Assessment: 32 - Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
Title of case study: Developing Our Understanding of Contemporary Art in the Western Balkans		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: July 2009 - present		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Jonathan Blackwood	Reader & Research Lead	August 2014-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: December 2014- present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>This programme of work, built on research undertaken in Bosnia-Herzegovina and North Macedonia from 2011-14, elicited new understandings of the unique challenges faced by contemporary artists in the post-Yugoslav context, in the contexts of the 1990s conflicts, and post-socialist transformation.</p> <p>This work created new opportunities for international artists to exhibit work in the UK context and for Scottish artists to work in North Macedonia, enhancing the. understanding of the broad context of contemporary art in Europe.</p> <p>Focusing on cultural ecologies, activism and protest, this research has added rich layers of understanding through curatorial projects, critical writing and through international exchange.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>The work has employed discrete methodologies and continually built and developed new audiences for the artists researched, building partnerships and networks between the UK and former Yugoslav republics, through a programme of participatory observation, academic research, public dialogue and curated exhibitions and events.</p> <p>In Critical Art in Contemporary Macedonia^{R1} Blackwood delivered the first-ever English language book on contemporary art in Macedonia, following years of participatory observation in the country's art scene. The book involved twenty-three art workers, artists and curators, whose voices were foregrounded in the book through written interviews, alongside a critical overview of 8,000 words by the author.</p> <p>The project also uses critically-informed historical writing alongside challenging curation of selected contemporary artists that have substantially developed national and international audiences' understanding of contemporary art from Macedonia. This led to the first exhibitions of Macedonian contemporary art in the UK (since its independence) at the Gray's School of Art in 2016 ('Imaginarium') and at Summerhall, Edinburgh, in 2017^{R2}</p> <p>The research focused on cultural ecologies; censorship and contemporary art; art and post-socialism/post-Yugoslav transitions; mapping previously under-researched territories in the English language, and for the first time in the case of North Macedonia.</p> <p>Since 2014, Blackwood has organised exhibitions internationally (Cetinje, Montenegro- 2014; Zagreb, Croatia - 2014; Skopje - 2019) and nationally (Summerhall, Edinburgh - 2017; Peacock</p>		

Visual Arts - 2019; exhibition of Bosnian art - 2020, postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic). These exhibitions have featured a mixture of high-profile practitioners and emerging artists, which included a solo show of Bosnia's leading performance artist, Jusuf Hadžifejzović in Zagreb (his first in the Croat capital since the 1980s); the 2017 Macedonian exhibition with Igor Toshevski (a representative of his country at the 2011 Venice Biennale) and the first Scottish show of Mladen Miljanović (Bosnia's representative at 2013 Venice Biennale). This exhibition enabled Aberdeen audiences to consider topical issues such as Brexit and the overlapping of competing nationalisms through an unfamiliar lens from another part of Europe, drawing parallels between developments in the Western Balkans, and the Scottish/UK context.

This research has also given opportunities to young artists from the region to mount their first exhibitions in the UK and to grow and develop networks, as well as providing the same opportunity for young Scots artists in Macedonia^{R4}.

This exchange is critical to the development of careers, the growth of informed context, and the reception for contemporary art from the region. This research has been led by teaching practice and two immersive student trips to Skopje (in 2015 and 2019). These have exemplified this relationship, produced an exhibition, and are unique in the UK context.

This research developed significant international networks of scholars with a focus on contemporary art from the former Yugoslavia and wider afield, evidenced in the 2017 Association of Art Historians conference panel (co-chaired by Blackwood) entitled "Radical Art in Transition: Counter-Culture, Protest and Activism in the Western Balkans since 1968", which attracted a cohort of speakers from Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, USA, and the UK.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1 - Blackwood, J (2016), *Critical Art in Contemporary Macedonia*, Skopje: Mala Galerija

R2 - Blackwood, J (2017), *Captured State: New Art from Macedonia*, Edinburgh & Skopje: Summerhall & TP Sandinista

R3 - Blackwood, J (2018), "In the Shadow of Alexander the Great: Censorship, Ideology and Contemporary Art in Macedonia", in Kennedy, R. & Coulter, R. (eds.), *Censoring Art: Silencing the Artwork*, London: IB Tauris

R4 - Blackwood, J (2019), *In Between States*, exchange exhibition between Scotland (Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen) and Museum of the city of Skopje, North Macedonia. Published Skopje: TP Sandinista

R5 - Blackwood, J (2019- ed.) *Duplex 100m2 & Contemporary Art in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, Sarajevo: Editions Riveneuve

R6 - Blackwood, J (2020), "An Alloy of Art and Activism in North Macedonia" in Ieven, B.K, Steinbock, E & de Valcke, M (eds.) *Art & Activism* London & New York: Routledge

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

With a total of £23,500 of funding internally allocated from the Scottish Funding Council's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), an international exchange network was created between young artists and curators in Scotland and Macedonia throughout 2018/19 and 2019/20. This

resulted in three young Macedonian artists having their first-ever exhibition in the UK at Peacock Visual Arts (<https://peacockvisualarts.com/in-between-states/>), with a return show at the Museum of the City in Skopje in August 2019. They worked alongside two young Scottish artists and an emerging Scottish curator, providing a platform for the young artists to showcase their work to more than 200 people in a single week (<https://www.opafondacija.org/zaum/in-between-states-new-art-from-north-macedonia/>).

Having been awarded £3,500 from a Carnegie Research Incentive Grant, Blackwood spent a year researching, writing, and delivering the first-ever English language book on contemporary art in Macedonia: *Critical Art in Contemporary Macedonia*. It subsequently sold 250 copies and is a de facto reference used to inform critics, curators, and young art workers. In addition to being widely reported in local media, the successful launch of the book was also covered internationally by the Macedonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (http://ekonomijaibiznis.mk/ControlPanel/Upload/Free_Editions/hOUSi3xQzUqOhkDkKDrVGQ/oktomvri%202016/files/basic-html/page93.html).

This research programme also created opportunities for young artists from Gray's School of Art to design and deliver two exhibitions in public spaces at the end of immersive week-long visits to experience Skopje in 2015 and 2019, through the full range of the Blackwood's Macedonian contacts. The latter exhibition was a collaboration between Robert Gordon University students and their equivalents from the Faculty of Fine Arts at St. Cyril and St. Methodus University, Skopje. Similar opportunities for a new cohort of young artists and art workers were underway but have been paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic (<https://herestheartists.org/>).

As a further result of this research activity, the Jusuf Hadžifejzović's exhibition "Property of Emptiness" was seen by 393 people in a run of just over two weeks, and was extensively covered internationally in Croatian and Bosnia media.. Multiple audiences were subsequently attracted in further iterations of the exhibition in Sarajevo, Belgrade and South Korea. The exhibition also enabled the re-establishment of a significant cultural link between Zagreb and Sarajevo that had been interrupted by the wars of the 1990s (<https://www.culturenet.hr/default.aspx?id=61960> and <http://www.seecult.org/vest/prodavnica-praznine>).

The 2017 Summerhall exhibition was the first show of contemporary Macedonian art in Scotland since the country's independence in 1991 and was reviewed in the local press and TV. It is seen by staff at Summerhall as continuing the tradition of the founding director, Richard Demarco, who worked extensively in the former socialist world in the 1970s and 1980s. (<https://vimeo.com/237217081> and (<https://www.opafondacija.org/zaum/captured-state-new-art-from-macedonia/>).

Blackwood has worked extensively with organisations nationally (Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen; Summerhall, Edinburgh; National Galleries of Scotland), and internationally (National Gallery of Macedonia; Museum of City of Skopje; Čarlama, Sarajevo; duplex 100m2, Sarajevo).

Significant promotional work has also gone into this research programme via public lectures at national institutions, all of them drawing artists from Bosnia, Macedonia and former Yugoslavia. (https://issuu.com/natgalleriessco/docs/what_s_on_guide_spring_2014_on_scre_pp.22-23; "An Anatomy of Contemporary Art in Bosnia-Herzegovina", National Galleries of Scotland, 2014;.

“After the Captured State: NEoN festival, Dundee, November 2019; <https://northeastofnorth.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/NEoN-Re@ct-Social-Change-Art-Technology-Abstracts-FINAL.pdf> p.3).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Statement by Kasia Jackowska, Curator, Summerhall
2. Statement by Janka Vukmir, Director, Institute of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, Croatia
3. Statement by Nuno Sacramento, Director, Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen
4. Carnegie Trust for the Universities in Scotland Annual Report 2015-16: https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_trust_universities/2018/12/18110419/CTUS-Annual-Report-2015-16.pdf
5. Mladen Miljanović “Utopian Realism” Peacock Visual Arts: <https://artmag.co.uk/peacock-visual-arts-mladen-miljanovic-utopian-realism/>
6. Interview in Global Voices: <https://globalvoices.org/2018/11/26/on-contemporary-art-in-the-balkans-an-interview-with-jon-blackwood/>
7. <https://www.theskinny.co.uk/art/emerging-artists/captured-state-summerhall-edinburgh>
8. <https://www.thenational.scot/news/17420562.what-scotland-can-learn-from-culture-in-former-yugoslav-republics/> (The National Opinion piece, 10.2.19)
9. <https://adelajusic.wordpress.com/2016/09/06/jonathan-blackwood-contemporary-refresh-at-gallery-brodac-sarajevo/> (“Against Pessimistic Speech, authored article in *Oslobodjenje*, 24 August 2016)