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The Road to Meikle Seggie

Giles Sutherland

Richard Demarco, *The Road to Meikle Seggie*, Edinburgh: Luath Press, new edition, with an Italian translation, 2015, 180 pp, pb, £15, ISBN: 9781910021842.

In preparation for an exhibition in Edinburgh's Henderson Gallery in 1978 Richard Demarco – gallery director, artist, teacher, lecturer, artistic explorer and adventurer – prepared a modest book with illustrations which he entitled *The Road to Meikle Seggie*. The title took its name from an extended metaphor that Demarco had developed over a number of years where he set out his aesthetic, spiritual, philosophical and pedagogical credo. The name came from a small farm, high in the Ochil Hills, a few miles from Milnathort, near the ancient border between the shires of Perth and Kinross. The extended essay at the core of the publication is an important text, not only in the context of Scottish art but in a much wider, European, field of reference. To characterise Demarco's activities under the label of 'artistic' or 'art historical' activity is, in any case, a self-limiting view. Demarco, has on many occasions, stressed that he is 'not in the art world' and does not wish to be seen in that light.

Thirty-seven years after that initial publication, *The Road to Meikle Seggie* has been re-published in a handsome bi-lingual edition (English and Italian) with additional illustration and a new preface by Donald Smith, former director of The Scottish Storytelling Centre. Both the linguistic and circumstantial aspects of this new edition are important. Demarco has stressed his own deep roots in European and Italian culture. His father, Carmino Demarco, and his mother, Elizabeth Fusco, both traced their origins to Italy. For many years, Carmino ran Maison Demarco on the model of the European café-salon that was the core of artistic intellectual development from Kraków to Paris in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such a familial example was the precedent for the many manifestations of the Demarco Gallery, in Edinburgh, from the 1960s to the 1990s.

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Donald Smith's introduction is both visionary and timely. It acknowledges the contribution of Demarco as a major thinker, who happened to be born and brought up in Edinburgh, to the great good fortune of Scotland, and Demarco as an adept and skilled story-teller. His story is a continuous narrative that he has constructed across time and space. In it, he inter-weaves pre-history, myth, the artistic avant-garde, fact, fiction and *genius loci* into a continuing, enthralling tale. It is both specific and universal and, like all the best stories, it is inclusive and inspiring.

In a postscript in the original text, Demarco recounts how the Meikle Seggie idea developed:

Five years ago I made a full entry in my diary entitled 'THE ROAD TO MEIKLE SEGGIE, SUNDAY, 7th APRIL, 1973'. It was not the first time that I had travelled the road; I had first discovered Meikle Seggie on an autumn evening in 1972, but I could not find the words to describe my experience. The words I did use are inadequate to describe an almost completely visual experience but they help me to keep the visual memory of an unforgettable day in focus.

On this clear day, more bright and sparkling than any I can remember, with the sky in constant movement, in rhythm with the swaying branches of the trees blown by a gusty North wind... you could really see 'The Road to Meikle Seggie'. It was the day when this unique and incomparable man-made, ten-mile-long line became part of the journey that has already begun for everyone involved in 'Edinburgh Arts 73'. Perhaps this road helps define 'Edinburgh Arts' as an expedition into that space and place, that mysterious country beyond time, which only Scottish landscape can represent to all expatriate Scots dreaming of their far-off homeland in that state of reverie, that heightened sense of awareness which has produced some of Scotland's best music and literature.

On such a day, when the bright springtime evening light became a prolonged twilight reluctant to leave the Western sky, it seemed natural that, at 8.00 p.m., the sun's almost horizontal rays should fall upon the waters of Loch Leven with its island castle so tragically associated with the years of imprisonment of Mary Queen of Scots. The golden light fell upon the fluttering wings of a great flock of birds forming a large cloud of outsize snowflakes over the bright blue waters of the lake against the steel blue sky. Their cries were less than harsh, yet they resembled seagulls. Every feature of the landscape around the lake could be identified, and even in the far

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distance, the colour and form of the hills and clouds was shown in minute detail.

The 17th century mansion of Kinross House, with its surrounding parkland dominated the flat Western shores of the lake. From here it was possible to walk to the water's edge to where the birds were alighting in animated groups. The drive back to Edinburgh across the Forth Bridge contained two more manifestations of the magic of the day. It was possible to see the mountains of the West; around Loch Lomond, blue-black rounded shapes against a thin streak of neon pink sky, supporting the full weight of the ominous grey clouds which towered above, and over the bridge there appeared in the golden light of the south-western sky a clear form in the shape of an enormous bird – a flying dragon with a five-mile wing span with two enormous claws stretched almost as far as its eagle head.

That was the way a perfect day could end – a day that truly began on that road to Meikle Seggie. Like all impossibly beautiful things it had to be searched out like the one true secret road in any fairy tale. There was fairy tale magic in the air. You had to be sure of your instincts and not be led off to the easy, more obvious routes which beckon comfortingly to the Sunday motorists. The Meikle Seggie road being like a cart track and if you are not specially aware you would be bound to drive right on past en route for Ledlanet. This was my first drive in full daylight along the road to Meikle Seggie in preparation for my exhibition of paintings and drawings at the Octagon Gallery in Belfast at the end of May. The road begins 45 minutes from the Demarco Gallery at Melville Crescent, at that moment you first see the one and only 'official' road sign to Meikle Seggie. (pp. 71–73)

Characteristically, Demarco blends matter-of-fact detail and a poetic-mythological vision in a prose style at once precise and colourful. It is an artist's vision: landscape and place seen through the filter of intense aestheticism and inner feeling. Yet Demarco tempers his flights of fancy, anchoring the text to reality with reference to contemporary detail. This is the prose of the artist trained in design, illustration and mural drawing; it is the written equivalent of the precise, line-based drawing style that Demarco has so inimitably made his own.

In the text, Demarco mentions 'Edinburgh Arts'. This is yet another facet of this visionary individual's multi-faceted career – part of what he himself calls

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his *gesamtkunstwerk* or 'total art work': drawing, painting and print-making, gallery direction and work as curator, pedagogy, poetry and writing – his *largesse* and love are all part of a single project: to share the world's beauty and its deeper meanings and messages. Edinburgh Arts began in 1972 as an experimental Edinburgh-based summer school attracting mainly North American students and educators. The six-week intensive curriculum included art-making, field trips and lectures, conducted by some of the best teachers Demarco could find, such as Buckminster Fuller, Joseph Beuys and Tadeusz Kantor. Edinburgh Arts was unashamedly inspired by Black Mountain College – the experimental liberal arts community set up by John Andrew Rice and others in North Carolina in 1933. Buckminster 'Bucky' Fuller had been part of the original faculty at Black Mountain.

Edinburgh Arts evolved beyond the confines of the campus, the lecture theatre and the city to encompass ever more ambitious journeys, first to parts of Scotland within striking distance of Edinburgh, then to the western seaboard of Scotland and eventually to circum-navigatory voyages around the British Isles. The culmination of the journeys eventually embraced the Neolithic temple, Hagar Qim, on Malta and the standing stones of Callanish on Lewis and the Ring of Brodgar in Orkney, with all points in between. These journeys inspired various publications, including the 'companion' text to *The Road to Meikle Seggie – The Artist as Explorer* – published in the same year, 1978.

In Demarco's own words:

the essence of the Edinburgh Arts concept . . . is a new kind of gallery space for me and a new kind of learning space. It started off in 1972 as an alternative to the seemingly never-ending programme of exhibitions which the Demarco Gallery was committed to (an average of 50 a year for eight years), and came out of my belief that Giuseppe Chiari is right when he says *L'arte corrompe. L'arte est facile*. I happen to believe that the 20th century art world feeds on itself, and artists see the map of Europe in a distorted way – hence the gathering of artists at the Basle Fair and the Cologne Kunstmarkt, rather than gathering at holier places where, perhaps, in the past, the wisest men went on pilgrimages. I speak not only of the great medieval university centres and the holy islands of Iona and Torcello, but also of Stonehenge. We must go further back than the Renaissance spirit to find a significant way to develop so called artistic concepts, knowing of course that there is no progress in art, merely discovery.

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Reflecting on Demarco's conception of the journey and its connection with contemporary 'land-art', Lucy Lippard, the American critic, in her classic text, *Overlay*, observed:

The person who has done most to conceptualize the connection between such contemporary lines on the land, ritual art and the ancient notion of the journey, is Richard Demarco a Scottish artist turned arts administrator/organizer/spiritual tour guide. An indefatigable traveller and proselytiser who cares deeply about the soul of contemporary culture, Demarco began his 'Edinburgh Arts Journey' in 1976, though he had been sowing ideas about ancient/modern connections for several years before that. The annual voyage with artists, students and interested participants explores sites in Sardinia, Malta, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the Azores, and the British Isles, and is itself Demarco's work of art about these connections.

Lippard's final remark, that the annual voyage, or journey, is Demarco's 'work of art ... about these connections' is a crucial one. This, taken in conjunction with Demarco's observation that The Road to Meikle Seggie and the Edinburgh Arts journeys were '... a new kind of gallery space for me and a new kind of learning space...' form the basis of Demarco's pedagogical-aesthetic philosophy – the journey, with its participants and all the complex combinations and permutations of relationship within it, is a form of art.

In 1995, the National Galleries of Scotland bought the Demarco Archive, dating from the late 1950s to that point. The archive represents a treasure trove for researchers interested in all aspects of Demarco's extraordinary journey. Amongst this huge collection of notebooks, artworks, drawings, sketches, photographs, catalogues, correspondence and much else besides, is a closely typed document entitled 'The Road to Meikle Seggie Leads to Gallery Krzysztofory', dated 1974. It is a report, possibly for the board of directors of the Demarco Gallery and the Scottish Arts Council – likely sponsors of Demarco's trip, one of scores, which Demarco made to Poland. The entry for 5 May includes the following:

It was a day of warm sunny weather – the ideal day to embark on the journey which undoubtedly was an extension of my favourite road in Scotland, The Road to Meikle Seggie – the road which leads to the true, unspoiled beauty of Scotland's landscape, untouched by the 20th century; the road which has taught me to seek out all the roads which resemble it. In fact, this Saturday was to introduce me to the road to

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Morskie Oko. The road led directly south from Krakow, through rich farmland and small towns such as Myslenice . . . there was time to sketch a typical landscape near Oświęcim – an idyllic landscape of small, curving hills with innumerable wooden farm buildings and the fields terraced into compact, manageable plots, despite the steep rolling nature of the land.

Morskie Oko, ‘the eye of the sea’, is a small glacial lake high up in the Tatra Mountains; Oświęcim is the Polish name for Auschwitz. In the coming years, Demarco was to lead many others on the road to Morskie Oko and to Auschwitz. It is a tribute to the breadth and depth of Demarco’s vision that it should embrace such barbarism and such beauty.

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