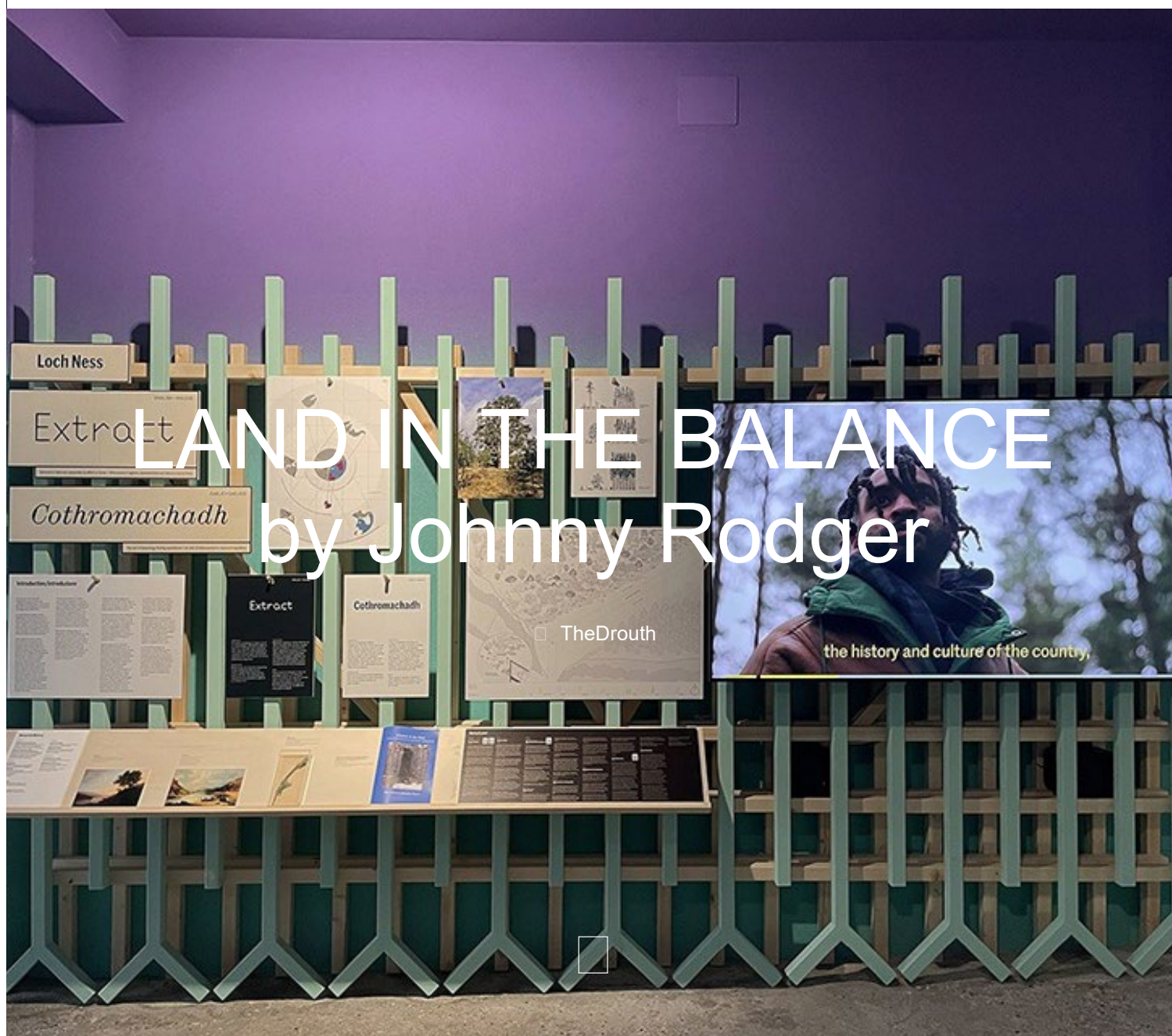




THE DROUTH



It sometimes seems that never enough has been made of Scotland's presence – the Scottish Pavilion – at the Venice Biennale. The 2023 architecture exhibition (- hopefully not the last Scottish one ever, as 2024 was cancelled) was an exploration of the connection between architecture and language on a traumatised land. A *Fragile Correspondence* was curated by *Architecture Fringe*, *-ism Magazine* and */other*, and is now showing at the V&A in Dundee. *Johnny Rodger* reviews.

A FRAGILE CORRESPONDENCE: V&A Museum, Dundee

At least since 1867, with the publication of Marx's *Das Kapital* (-and in particular Chapter 27, which deals with the Highlands of Scotland), the connection between all the traumas the 19thC inflicted on Scotland's land and people, and on many lands and peoples beyond, have been made explicit for anyone to read. In Marx's very succinct summing of it, the new industries needed thousands of workers, the Clearances provided them, homeless and penniless to the factory gates; the factories also needed some raw materials, control of the colonies ensured both a steady supply of those and a vast captured market for their products; and the new capitalists and industrialists also evidently needed vast empty territories where they could find leisure, hunting and shooting like the new kings they were, so the cleared Highland estates were ready to oblige. Thus, the Highland Clearances, the Industrial Revolution and the Empire are all seen as a complete and indissociably linked network of power abuse and its drastic effects.

Yet, now, with a whole century and more passed, what can we do with such an analysis? In the face of the collapse of the factories to the poisoned industrial ground, the continued depopulation of the Highlands and stealth assimilation of its population, and the long continual struggle for reparation and redistribution by peoples of exploited land across the globe, how do we work not just to understand the harm done and the causes of the trauma(s) but to make good, heal the wounds and render places amenable for good living?

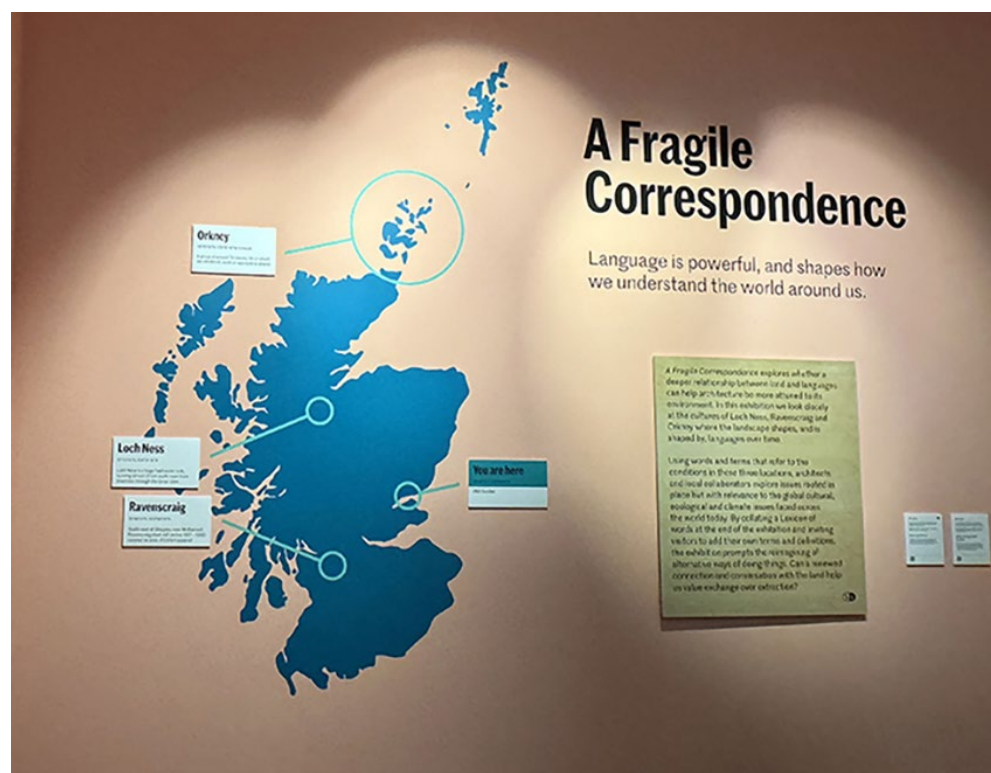
This seems to be the approach adopted by *A Fragile Correspondence*, a multi-disciplinary team who came together to create the exhibition for the Scottish Pavilion at the 2023 Architecture Venice Biennale.



No-one at the V&A Dundee restaging of the exhibition is saying that the economic and political history of the cause of trauma is no longer relevant. The stance here, however, is on the ground itself, observing and nurturing new growth, new stirrings from the land, and listening to the voices on and of that land. As a coalition of artists, architects, activists, poets and local people, they are concerned to collaborate and explore whether a deeper relationship between land and languages can help architecture be more attuned to its environment. The three places which make up the exhibition as case studies are: the former site of Ravenscraig steel works in Lanarkshire, the Abriachan forest around Loch Ness and the archipelago of Orkney.

So, rather than take the historian's top down academic and intellectual (as in Marx) analysis, that gives us the whence, the cause and the blame for the trauma those lands have suffered and which rupture their story, as artists, poets, writers, architects and inhabitants, this team look at the where and the whither, the recondite flourishings and glories of the wounded earth, and the scope for future growth.

Thus, language is important in their work, as is the fact that these people do not just speak 'at' the land, they are not just measuring and calculating, but are on the land and engaged with it in its future. This, of course, makes the project necessarily a 'grassroots' one, and it emerges from the ground up in several different ways. Firstly, because each group takes not just a focused but a holistic attitude to their land, the mood is akin to that of Blaise Pascal's dictum, 'Nature is an infinite sphere of which the centre is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere.' Part of their identification with these special places, and the recognition that their own personal and social regeneration and growth is entangled with that of the land there, is manifested – especially in the Abriachan case – through a type of authenticity, whereby a spectrum of their operations and also the artefacts they produce – from rewilding the forest with indigenous species, to making textiles, furniture, quilting, 3D art and sculpture, are wrought in materials native to the place, for the place.



A very potent component of this grassroots authenticity is found also in the careful but celebratory underpinning of the whole exhibition in language, and the extensive resources of language for sustaining a world. Each case study – Abriachan, Ravenscraig, Orkney – is organised and displayed under a rubric, respectively – Extract, Erase, Fragment –, and an improvisatory searching, cataloguing, narrating, provoking and hymning of each place takes off from there. Most significant here, is the use of local language, and specific genuine terms which embody the long organic relationship of people and place. Words like the Gaidhlig *cothromachadh* meaning to balance or weigh up in the case of Abriachan, and the Scots *saunt* meaning to erase or wipe away in the case of Ravenscraig.

Indeed, the highlight for this reviewer, was the long prose poem recited gently by Amanda Thomson over the film of the re-stirrings of nature (not just a myriad of plants and flowers and bushes and trees, but deer, badgers, rabbits and foxes too) on the poisoned ground and ruins that were the site of Ravenscraig. Thomson is an artist whose medium is the word and she has previously published a Scots dictionary of nature terms. In this extended performance, she patiently constructs an idyll on and with this wasteland. As such, not only does her work chime with and belong to a long Scottish tradition of nature poetry (like Donnchadh Ban Mac-an-t-saoir's 18thC book-length praise poem of one mountain, Beinn Dorain (often said to be the greatest poem in the Gaidhlig language)), but in taking, as Edwin Morgan said of Hugh MacDiarmid, the risk of naming, she also moves that tradition forward in showing us how language is an indispensable human factor in any endeavour for regeneration.

Overall, the exhibition takes a very generous approach to the architectural understanding of working 'with' the land, rather than merely 'on' the restricted notion of 'site', and makes the case for why this is necessary. The sample of just three individual places – Highland, Lowland and Island – is paradoxically broad in its representation of the state of the land. Although the Orkney case may seem sober and sedate in its historical continuity by comparison with the traumas caused by 'the catastrophe of racial capitalism' in the other two cases, nonetheless it serves, to a key extent, as some type of balance, as a test case, a what might have been and could have been scenario, in weighing up (a *chothromachadh*) the value of events, situations and possibilities for our future.

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The Drouth ('The Thirst') is a website and magazine published in Glasgow, Scotland. Founded in 2001 by **Mitch Miller** and **Johnny Rodger**, we continue to pursue our original remit, to give space to writers and artists to stimulate debate on literature, film, politics, reportage, visual culture, music, and architecture.

Electron Club, Centre for Contemporary Arts, 350
Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow G2 3JD

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