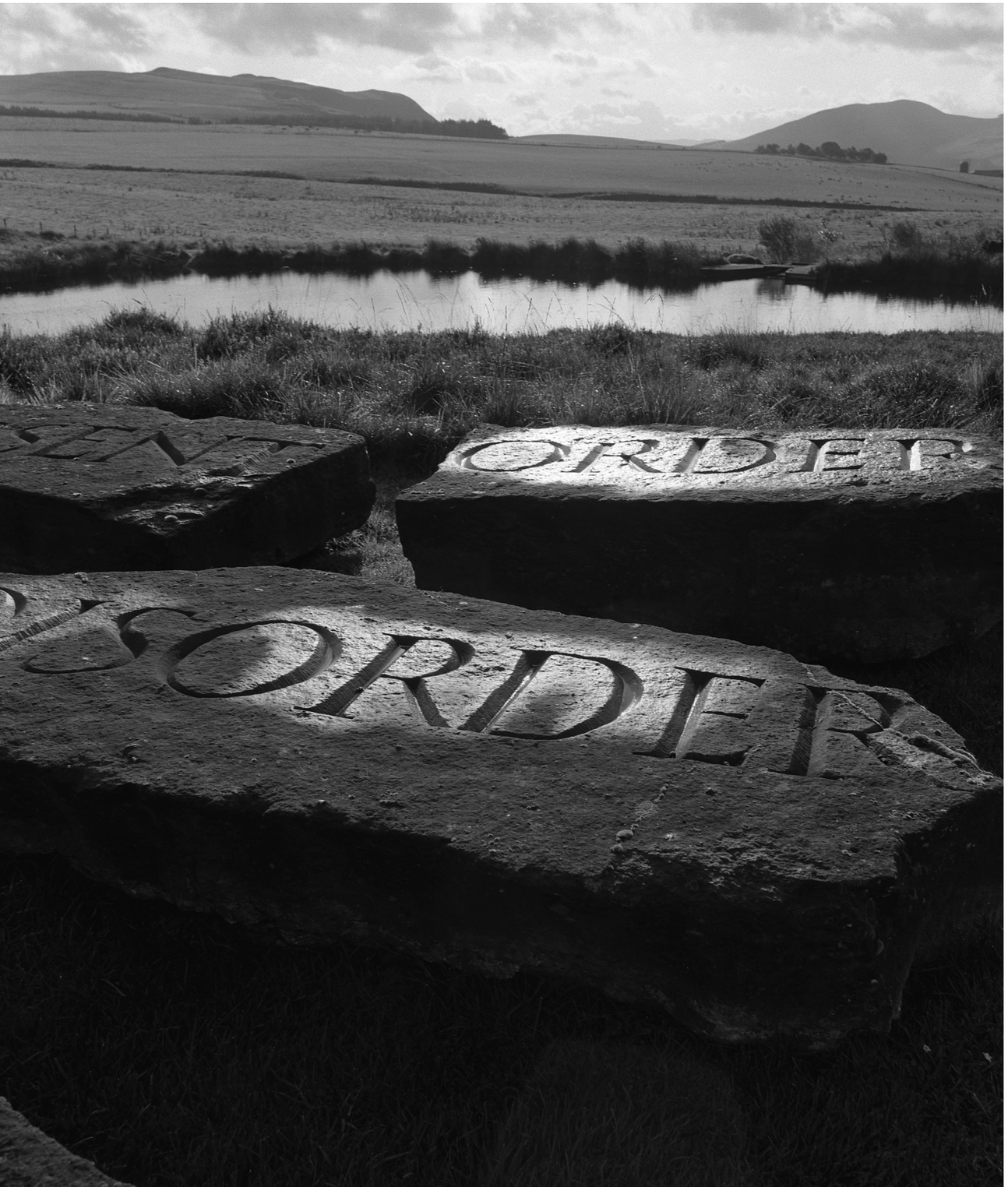
Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The Present Order Is the Disorder of the Future*, 1983. Photograph by Robin Gillanders. (By permission of Robin Gillanders and the Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay.)




Some of Ian Hamilton Finlay's collaborators assembled outside his exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, 1977. Left to right: Stephen Bann, Andrew Dempsey (Arts Council England) John Thorpe, Sue Finlay, John Andrew, Ron Costley and Michael Harvey. At the centre is Finlay's *Arbre* carved by Michael Harvey ca. 1976.


Greg Thomas

# Crafting Arcadia: notes from Collaborators and Friends of Ian Hamilton Finlay

In 2020, the stone carver John Andrew (1933–2021) contacted the Fleming-Wyfold Foundation regarding an online story published as part of their 'My Favourite Scottish Work of Art' series. The foundation, which promotes and collects Scottish art, invites a rolling cast of guest contributors to select pieces for this series; the author on this occasion was the art historian Neil MacGregor. The work he had selected was Ian Hamilton Finlay's (1925–2006) stone relief *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1976), a mordant homage to Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) which places a World War Two tank amongst the lush woodland where a tomb would be found in Poussin's masterpiece of the same name (1637–38). Substituting Poussin's emblem of death as inevitable levelling force with an image of death as modern military collateral, Finlay sets the violence of 20th-century warfare in the shadow cast by European Neoclassical aesthetics.

John's point, a simple yet significant one, was that he had made the artwork in question. This reminder – rather than revelation, as Finlay generally credited his collaborators – and the wider questions it posed about the boundaries between artistic conception and technical realisation in Finlay's oeuvre and beyond, prompted Fleming-Wyfold director James Knox to contact me. As a regular contributor to the foundation's journal *Scottish Art News* with a particular interest in concrete poetry and the work of Finlay, would I be interested in undertaking a series of interviews or correspondences with John, and ultimately with as many of Finlay's collaborators as could be tracked down?

During the winter of 2020, in what turned out to be the penultimate year of his life, John unfolded a remarkable biography which had taken him from a working-class East-London childhood to an apprenticeship with the famed letter-carver Reynolds Stone (1909–1979), through which he began mingling in the rarefied circle of mid-century British intelligentsia. John's work with Finlay commenced in the early 1970s, following a tip-off from Finlay's existing collaborator, the letter artist Michael Harvey (1931–2013), who had previously also served as Stone's apprentice.

The layers of emotional, artistic, and cultural resonance to John's story were such that the wider task of tracing and conversing with Finlay's pool of trusted craftspeople whetted the appetite irresistibly. What has followed over the last two years has been a series of remote discussions with architects, stone carvers, photographers, typographers, poets, publishers, gallerists, painters, embroiderers, art historians, critics, collectors, gardeners, and one artist working in the medium of neon tube-lettering. Each has added a different layer of patina to my already variously coloured sense of Finlay the artist, the man, the friend, and, most critically, the collaborator. What the growing sheaf of recollections suggest so far on that final point is a series of creative exchanges that, while couched in certain strict tenets laid down by Finlay, generated crucial nuances and creative flourishes dependent on the temperament and skills of each creative partner. This in turn, poses questions about how we record the thoughts and opinions of collaborators to Finlay and other major artists, moving away from mythologies of genius towards an acceptance of the always and inevitably discursive, collaborative, and contingent nature of artistic creation.

A brief biography is overdue. Ian Hamilton Finlay was a poet, writer, visual artist, and gardener who, during the 1960s, began working under the auspices of 'concrete poetry', a form of poetic composition in which the visual or otherwise material qualities of language granted vital dimensions of meaning to the work. Finlay moved away from the rustically located, formally innovative short stories and lyric poems of his youth to develop a form of poetic composition whereby linguistic affinities and overlaps between words, letters and sounds were complemented by an increasingly mercurial range of material contexts. From the page-based poem Finlay turned to paper sculptures and then to screen-printed posters to bear out the visual and formal dimensions of language. From there it was a short step to setting poems in wood, glass, metal, fabric, concrete, stone, and a range of other surfaces that could grant additional layers of sensory and thematic resonance to the semantic and grammatical. By the late 1970s, this development was coupled with a reversion of language, image and sculptural effect to more historically informed and complementary roles, away from the 'intermedia' effects of the high sixties.

As this remarkable transformation was occurring, Finlay was also converting the grounds of Stonypath Farmhouse in the Pentland Hills – where he had taken up residence with his partner and collaborator Sue Swan in 1966, relocating from Edinburgh – into an interactive landscape of poem-objects latterly christened Little Sparta. Finlay's poet's

garden, which was the object of loving and scrupulous attention up until his death in 2006, and is now preserved by a trust, stands as his most lasting achievement. It is also the setting for another genre of work which might be called the 'landscape poem', whereby the presence of fragments of language in a natural setting alters, and is altered by, the carefully curated vistas enclosing it.

Across the 1960s–90s, Finlay's thematic range shifted from a rustic focus on fishing boats, rural Scottish economies, and natural scenery to the worlds of classical antiquity, and the many neoclassical revivals of subsequent European cultures, including the landscape gardening craze of the 18th century. The expression of Greco-Roman aesthetics and philosophy in political and social spheres, from the French Revolution to the advent of Fascism, was also a matter of concern.

Throughout his creative life, and despite the more trenchant and combative aspects of his personality, Finlay relied on both creative input and emotional and practical support to realise his designs. When he set up the small press Wild Hawthorn, in 1961, and the little magazine *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse* (*POTH*), which ran for 25 issues from 1962 to 1967, it was with his then-partner, the writer and teacher Jessie McGuffie (later Sheeler), who effectively served as production manager. Both projects are now synonymous with the story of book-art and concrete poetry in Britain and internationally. For the current project, Sheeler has provided a set of written reminiscences detailing her, and Ian's work and life together, compiled in 2014 but shared on 23 February 2022. The early Wild Hawthorn productions, Sheeler notes:

> [W]ere done by a mixture of laying pages out on the floor, cutting things up and fiddling layouts. Having got local artists to do art works for us, Glasgow Beasts was the first publication, 1961 I think. Pete McGinn, who lived in a mews cottage in Circus Lane did the papercuts. There was a photo-offset printer at that time in Dundas Street and I got them to do the first productions as well as *POTH* in due course.

The artist John Picking (b. 1939) collaborated with McGinn on paper-cut illustrations for *Glasgow Beasts an a Burd* (1961), an important early work consisting of jazzy dialect poetry alongside playful illustrations of animals. Picking also contributed to this interview series in writing, sending across the following reminiscences on 18 November 2021:

> One Sunday afternoon in 1961 Alan Jackson, a young poet, took me to meet Ian Hamilton Finlay at his flat in Fettes Row. We found him at his typewriter….When I arrived he was creating a set of very original two lined haiku inspired by Glasgow. He seemed pleased to meet me. His girlfriend Jessie had done English Literature at Edinburgh [Jessie in fact read Classics] and helped produce a very unusual poetry magazine called *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse*. Ian became more and more a visual artist who collaborated with others including craftsmen and typographers to create his work. Within half an hour of meeting him he provided me with sheets of white paper and a razor blade. He gave me the first poem and I cut through the paper to make the beasts in the poems. He sat on the divan with his typewriter and I lay on the carpet with a board. As he pulled the poems from his typewriter he launched them towards me. We did about six in a couple of hours. I went to England that Summer and when I returned Ian and Jessie had created The White Hawthorn Press and printed the first edition of *Glasgow Beasts*.

Other important early collaborators and friends included the publisher and doctor Michael Shayer, whose iconic, transatlantic independent press Migrant – run with Gael Turnbull (1928–2004), a writer who shared Shayer's medical training and, though Scottish, was based in Ventura, California – published some of Finlay's earliest poetry. Their 1960 publication *The Dancers Inherit the Party*, for example, included Finlay's pre-concrete poetry, comparable in idiom to the work of North-American Black Mountain and neo-objectivist poets such as Robert Creeley (1925–2006) and Lorine Niedecker (1903–70). I spoke to Shayer over the phone on 21 October 2021, with discussion focusing on Finlay's agoraphobia – which would later confine him to the grounds of Little Sparta for three decades – amongst other subjects:

> There were meetings in Edinburgh [during the early 1960s] of course. Jim Haynes fixed up a couple of readings for us at the Traverse Theatre, and then several other people met up there, including Tom Pickard. Finlay was there then but at that time was in one of his characteristic periods where he couldn't go out of the house. One of our two readings was just Ian Finlay poems … If there was any question of moving Ian, somebody had to come along with a car and park just outside his front door and he'd be whisked away to wherever he wanted to go to.

Both Shayer and Sheeler recall a character whose fragility was counter-balanced by a certain martial toughness liable to spill over into occasional shows of defensive aggression. More significantly, the relationships extend beyond what one would normally expect between a poet and co-editor or publisher, with Finlay's letters to these figures suggesting the immense emotional weight he placed on close creative relationships which were often also friendships or romances.

As Finlay's poetic vision began to require more ambitious forms of material realisation, an increasingly diverse range of contributors was sought out. Amongst participants in the series of interviews, the poet and publisher Simon Cutts (b. 1944) produced much of Finlay's late 1960s written work through his press Tarasque, while typographer and commercial designer Tom Bee (b. 1938) was responsible for much of the laying out and typesetting of Finlay's later page- and poster-based work. The art historians and critics Patrick Eyres (b. 1947) and Stephen Bann (b. 1942) provided illuminating glossaries and commentaries – Finlay's work during the 1970s–80s often incorporated learned narration or exegesis as an element of the artworks themselves – while photographer David Paterson (b .1945) captured many of Finlay's three-dimensional works in situ. In interior settings, Paterson also helped to stage mini-sculptural and poetic tableaux which formed integral components of poetry and art books. The illustrator Gary Hincks (b. 1949) was a frequent and versatile collaborator, a technical illustrator in his commercial life, who could bring various styles of penmanship or brushwork to Finlay's densely intertextual and allusive work depending on the artist, era, or mood that was to be invoked.

Ambitious three-dimensional schemes required a still wider range of expert accomplices. Stone, in particular, was a central concern of Finlay's practice from the late 1960s onwards, after the first sundial-poem was installed in the front garden at Stonypath in 1967. Masons and carvers were commissioned in high number: Andrew Whittle (b. 1953), Annet Stirling (b. 1953), Nicholas Sloan (b. 1951) and Peter Coates (b. 1963) amongst others. Indeed, as Coates noted to me on 3 February 2022, Finlay's commissions helped to bring new life to traditional crafts such as stone carving, providing an unusual livelihood for artists and craftspeople:

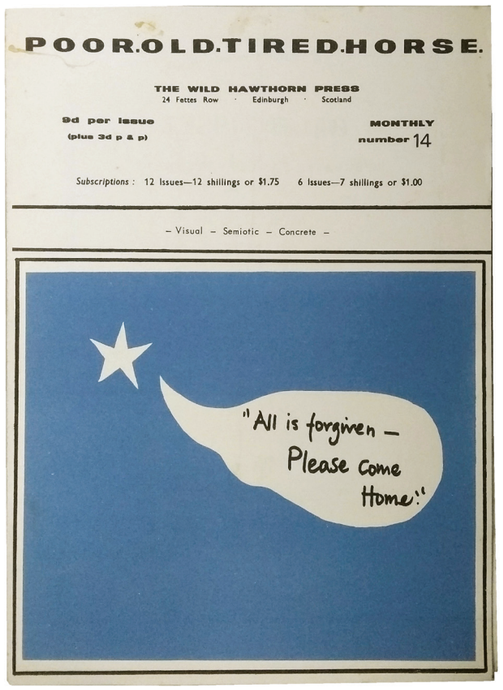
> There was a bit of public attention by that time [1994, when Coates first worked with Finlay] on his collaborative practice, and the fact that he was relying on traditional craftspeople to do that … . I would partly describe it, with the greatest possible respect, as a known source of work. There was a certain incredulity and revelry in some of the work that Finlay had made and was willing to make in stone, and a certain delight.

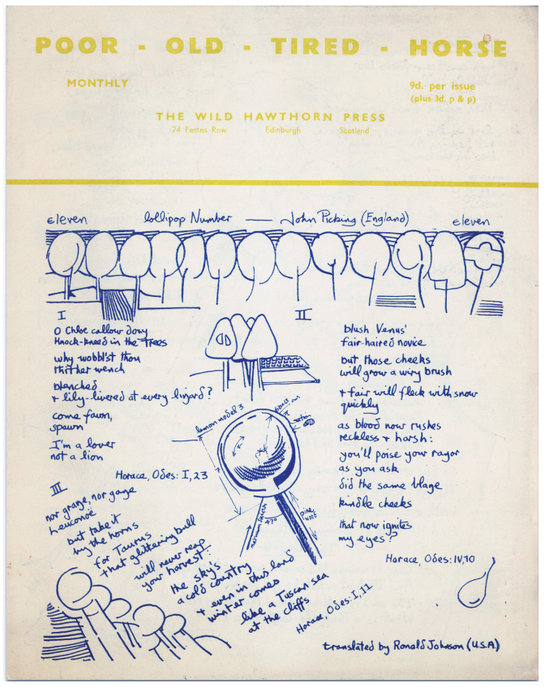
Architects were needed too: Andrew Townsend (b. 1958), who now runs a historic building-restoration practice In Oxfordshire, recalls first meeting Finlay as part of a student assignment – with Finlay a somewhat reluctant guest tutor – to design a goose-hut for the grounds of Little Sparta. The hut was actually realised and stands at the rear of the garden – on the shore of Lochan Eck – to this day, while Andrew went on to conceive a number of other structures for Finlay's poetic landscapes. Finlay also worked across a range of more delicate, small-scale and obscure media, including producing a series of works in neon-tube lettering, on which Julie Farthing was Finlay's collaborator.

Perhaps primary amongst all of Finlay's collaborators, however, was his former partner Sue Swan (b. 1943), who from 1966 lived with the artist at Stonypath and undertook much of the gardening and landscaping work that ensured its transformation into Little Sparta over the following decades. Her written recollections of moving to, and converting, the landscape around the house with Finlay, provided on 24 November 2021, are transportive:

> It was quite a bleak, isolated situation at that time [1966] – not a tree in sight – only moorland stretching around and some currant bushes in the neglected front garden … . That winter Ian made contact with a stone carver, Maxwell Allen … . Eventually [Allen] produced the Four Seasons sundial in pristine white marble (and some indoor works) – and it was erected in the centre of the front garden – just beyond the currant bushes. I'm afraid my response was 'You can't put a thing like that in a place like this!' However … the grass was able to be tamed and bricks were laid around the sundial and it began to fit in a little better.… I remained hesitant about more works that were added to the garden but I did begin 'gardening' around them as well as mowing the grass – digging borders, planting herbaceous things brought up to us by my Mum, or ordered from newspaper ads.… It was only gradually that I began

*Poor.Old.Tired.Horse*. 11, 1964; and 14, 1965. Single sheet folded once. Cover drawing by John Picking. (By permission of the Literary Estate of Ronald Johnson, John Picking, and the Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay.)



to understand Ian's work and to be able to work with him in siting poems and arranging the planting around them. My father gave us a lot of trees, Rowans, Spruce and some Scots Pine. I planted these and tied the Pines to the fence when the gales blew them flat. Ian was not a gardener – ever – he placed his works and I arranged the planting around them – he trimmed the grass in front of works that were situated in wild areas while I mowed the main areas of grass.

Of course, conversations like this have partly been invaluable to me as a writer on, and enthusiast of, Ian Hamilton Finlay's work. It is rare that a deceased artist leaves behind so many people capable of talking from a position of direct creative involvement about the conception of ideas, the ways in which those ideas were borne out through discussion and creative exchange, working methods, etcetera. So too – and perhaps more in line with what one might traditionally expect from friends of the deceased – my interviewees have helped me to construct a nuanced image of Finlay as an individual: a warm and genial spirit capable of tempestuous anger, a childlike joker with a cavernous intellectual hinterland, a generous, demanding, fragile friend.

Putting all this aside, however, my concern has also been to establish the extent to which the relationships just outlined influenced the creative spirit of Finlay's work. That is, to what degree and in what respects can the works these individuals produced in collaboration with Finlay also be considered their own works? In the case of Sue's planting schemes, how did the placement of Rowan, Spruce, and Pine, the mowing of grass and the digging of borders, assure the shape and character of the landscape poem? Assuming the answer is 'at least to some extent', there is a need to discover and document these collaborators' creative and indeed wider biographies and socio-cultural positions, just as we pore over Finlay's, to gain a sense of the implications and resonances of the artworks they helped to bring to life.

On that last point, two poles of possible argument might be said to have emerged over the course of the project so far. Exaggerated for the sake of neatness, they can be outlined as follows. On the one hand, the collaborators could be seen – and arguably are seen by a vague popular consensus informed by the stereotype of Finlay as a hard taskmaster – as working to unflinching, uncompromising instructions. Technical virtuosity was sought out, respected, and prized, but creative input discouraged and defrayed to a large extent. This position is close in certain respects to that taken by John Andrew – though with a far warmer relationship to Finlay than implied above – in our discussion on 30 November 2020:

> I saw a comparison between my chisels and Ian with collaborators. There's a thing called a pitcher and there's a punch, there's a claw, then there's a fine riffle or a polishing rub stone, there's a flat tool, and so on, all of them useful for particular tasks. And really, that's exactly how he worked with the collaborators. He was selecting people who could execute particular ideas.... He was very clear as to what he wanted.

It must be acknowledged that John's down-to-earth humility belies the extent of his creative contribution, and reflects his sense of kinship with the 'mason carvers' of the middle ages, 'working on various subjects to the glory of God and not egotism.'

On the other hand, collaborators including John could be seen as, if not centrally involved in the conception of the artwork, then able and authorised to bring a degree of aesthetic sensibility to play in the realisation of ideas. In the process they might add formal and even thematic dimensions absent in the original concept. The metaphor used by Finlay's critic Stephen Bann to describe this form of more artistically embedded collaboration, in his 1977 essay 'Ian Hamilton Finlay: An Imaginary Portrait', is that of the orchestra conductor, who 'takes the risk of performance... conducting the project in a virtuoso style which draws a large measure of attention to his own deliberate extension of the possibilities latent in the score.'

This is more comparable to the position taken by Nicholas Sloan (on 19 January 2022), who did note, however, that the nature of creative relationship shifted from collaborator to collaborator:

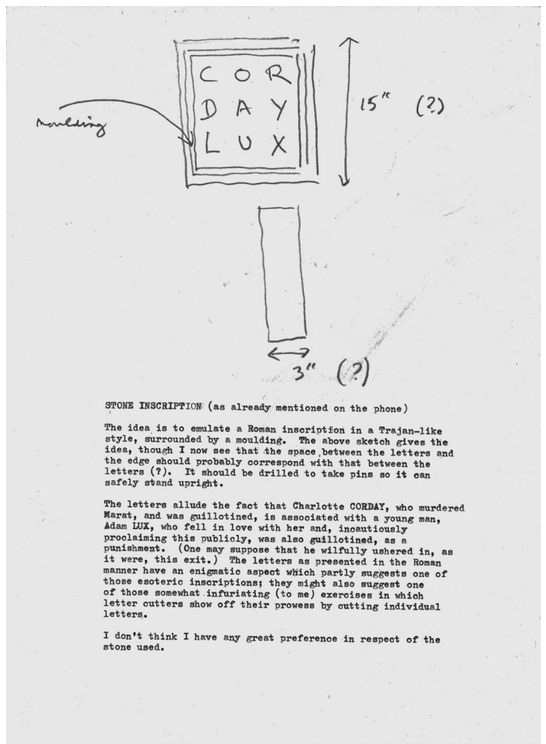
> I think there were a few people to whom [Finlay] did give precise instructions, particularly if he was working trade letter-cutters, for example, as opposed to self-employed designer-makers....But mostly, with people like me, he'd give us a lot of rope, particularly if he got to know you.... I found very early on he was giving me ideas and letting me run with them. I always chose the stone for jobs, for example. Occasionally he would say roughly what sort of stone he wanted but I would sometimes change his initial idea to a different kind of stone because I thought it was going to work better. And it was great.

Sloan provided the example of working with Finlay on his 1980 exhibition *Nature Over Again After Poussin*, which consisted of a series of artists' signatures Sloan carved into stone. 'I think probably because I had trained as an art historian Ian thought I'd be ideal for it', suggesting that Finlay was aware of how practical decisions such as choice of carving surface could inflect thematic range, and trusted certain partners to negotiate that relationship. 'For the stone with Watteau's signature on, for example, I found a bit of artifical marble that was perfect for it, that had the sort of artificiality of the Rococco look.... There was a lot of give and take like that.'

Other contributors have occupied more or less commingled aspects of both perspectives, and final analysis on the point cannot be attempted at this stage. However, in reaching towards a position, I want to seize on an example provided by another stone carver, Andrew Whittle, who worked with Finlay on his 1995 wall-plaque COR/DAY/LUX. The piece references the Girondist Charlotte Corday (1768–93) and the German political agitator and (initially) French Revolutionary sympathiser Adam Lux (1765–93). Corday was executed after assassinating Jean-Paul Marat (1743–1793); Lux reportedly offered himself up to the guillotine in protest at Corday's treatment. According to Whittle:

> The fact that the phrase had to be in three lines of text was what was important to Ian.... Initially I'd set it out in two lines, because it's two names, you know? 'Corday' and then 'Lux'. And he said: no, the whole point of it is that it's in three lines. I never quite worked out why that was, except that it's a Roman layout: where you don't worry about words breaking onto the next line. But that [showing me a drawing] was what I sent back to him. So these ears on the edge are very classically roman, it's called Ansate and that was my addition ... and he loved it.

What the example suggests in its evocation of a productive, collaborative push-and-pull relationship is that certain essential parameters of Finlay's art, consisting of its linguistic component and of aspects of material realisation – potentially relative placement of language-forms and the broad category of material surface on which they were to be berthed – were of vital and uncompromising significance. But there was also a fluid space between that inner kernel of formal and thematic essence and the final, outer visible form which a piece assumed, wherein the collaborator could bring their own creative character to bear. It was in this space that the spirit could play in Finlay's Arcadia – and where some of the most memorable creative projects undertaken by the artists and craftspeople I have spoken to took on their richest and deepest tones.




Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Andrew Whittle, 20 May 1995. Personal archive of Andrew Whittle. (By permission of the Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay and Andrew Whittle.)


Ian Hamilton Finlay and Andrew Whittle, *Corday Lux*, 1995. Portland stone, 450 x 350 x 80mm. Photograph by Andrew Whittle. (By permission of the Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay and Andrew Whittle.)