

Saving Demarco's archive will take funding and commitment

The possible closures of the [People's Story Museum](#) and [Summerhall Arts Centre](#) have attracted plenty of discussion.

The future of these two arts venues has added to the sense of a looming cultural crisis in a city which prides itself on its wealth of cultural institutions and events, including the Edinburgh Festival and Fringe. Summerhall has grown to become a key venue for art and performance since it was acquired from Edinburgh University in 2011. At present, the future of Summerhall as an arts venue is in doubt.

Among Summerhall's most precious aspects is the vast collection of material collected by [Richard Demarco, CBE](#), one of Scotland's most important cultural figures. The material in the archive tells the story of the Edinburgh Festival, which Demarco, now 94, has been intimately involved with for decades. A new home is now needed for it. The Demarco Archive Trust is currently examining possible new locations. It has also begun a [fundraising campaign](#) to cover the very substantial costs involved in moving and rehousing the archive.



Richard Demarco (photo by Edward Schneider)

Demarco's archive at Summerhall, in its thousands of documents, artworks and photographs, tells the rich tale of the Edinburgh Festival and Fringe.

An exhibition at the [Signet Library](#) during the 2022 Festival gave the public a glimpse of the fantastic material the archive contains. It's also a record of Demarco the cultural progenitor and his many connections with artists throughout Europe. The world renowned Serbian conceptual and performance artist Marina Abramović [recently spoke](#) of the key role played by "the legendary" Demarco in presenting her first international performance in 1973. Abramović is typical of the path-breaking artists that Demarco has promoted. The archive is a rich record of this activity. The profound uncertainty hanging over the future of Summerhall reflects a deep sense of threat and jeopardy. Demarco feels he must move. But where and how?

“I desperately need to move”

Summerhall has, through long-time collaborator Robert McDowell, (whose family trust owns the buildings), been a useful home for the archive. But it's always been far from ideal. Very little of the material can properly be exhibited or accessed. This goes against Demarco's hope that the archive will be “an educational resource” and inspiration to present and future generations. Archives are often dismissed as dusty repositories of the past, when most are pregnant with potential, including for creative use. This is how Demarco conceives of his archive, or ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ (a total work of art). But at present, this potential is thwarted by its current location.

Of particular immediate concern are floods which have affected the archive in recent years. Two serious leaks have caused substantial damage to sections of the archive. It's evidence of the rather ancient plumbing in the building which regularly blocks and overflows. Plaster has fallen from the ceiling in several sections, including on one of the corridors in the Demarco Archive section of the building. The place needs substantial restoration.

As a place to house an accessible archive, Summerhall is seriously deficient. The urgency of the need to move has been heightened by the [deep uncertainty](#) over the future of Summerhall. Against his wishes, Summerhall's Director Robert McDowell had to agree to putting the place up for sale when pressured by his siblings. Efforts are being made to ensure that it remains as an arts centre, but this could be a forlorn hope. Various deadlines have been given to Demarco to move out. Even if he doesn't have to move out very soon, there is still an urgent need given the threat of further damaging floods.



Flood damage at the Demarco Archive. Photo by Sarah Waters. On a recent visit, one of the upstairs rooms had drying, rumpled documents scattered all over it. Photographs were being teased apart, with a desperate hope they could be saved. Staff from the National Galleries stepped in to assist, but some material was beyond salvage. There were several boxes marked "For Disposal", with significant, irreplaceable material in each. Such losses deeply pain Demarco. For him, it's a physical expression of the true values of the Festival being eaten away at, dissolved.

“I have no energy left to explain this”

Demarco needs the archive to speak for his cultural vision after he dies. Speaking on Radio Scotland in 2012, Demarco held that the “spirit of the Festival should be “a physical reality”. This physical reality was previously the Traverse Theatre (Demarco was a key figure in its creation) and the Demarco Gallery. *Now it is his archive.*

He hopes that his archive will survive to help tell the story of the Festival and explain the cultural vision behind it. He feels his physical and intellectual energy ebbing away. “I have no energy left to explain this”. Without him around, who will be able to really communicate the deep meaning? He has many supporters, such as those involved with the [Demarco Archive Trust](#), but no one has his deep knowledge of the archive, borne of his close involvement with the artists whose work is represented in it.



Richard Demarco (photo by Edward Schneider)

RICO

Without Demarco there, who will be able to communicate this cultural vision with the passion that he still does? He has articulated this in numerous books, lectures, films (including Marco Federici's documentary [RICO: The Richard Demarco Story](#)) and interviews. Demarco has been, in addition to his roles as a cultural progenitor, artist, teacher and patron of the arts, a [significant public intellectual](#). Yet, he feels he has failed to transmit his message to enough people.

This adds to his sense of alienation and of feeling unacknowledged in Scotland. Many of his most significant supporters and advocates are to be found overseas. There is a substantial risk that the archive will eventually end up overseas, possibly in Poland. Demarco is keen to find a new home for it in Scotland, where young Scots can be inspired by it and *use* it.

The National Galleries of Scotland are planning to house a large amount of archival material collected by Demarco at their proposed [The Art Works facility in Granton](#). The plan is to make this material accessible to the public. However, this is the collection that the National Galleries acquired from Demarco in 1995, and *not* the material now at Summerhall, which Demarco considers more significant. Hence, the need to find a sizeable new home.



Richard Demarco's watercolour of Prestonfield House, location of a fundraising dinner.

Funding appeal

But even to simply store it is beyond Demarco's current finances. "I have no money".

Demarco has [launched a major appeal](#), with an initial target of £50,000. This is a conservative estimate of the costs involved in moving to a new permanent home in 2025, as well as reviewing the collection and professionally conserving as many artworks as possible. Upcoming fundraising events include a dinner at Prestonfield House on 15 November, when some of Demarco's own artworks will be auctioned off. It is evidence

of the urgency of the situation that Demarco faces that he's prepared to do so. Tickets for the event are [now available](#).

“that which contains darkness also contains the prospect of light”



Richard Demarco (photo by Edward Schneider)

Demarco, now in his 95th year, sees existential threats to the Edinburgh Festival and Fringe, and the European cultural values that inspired it. Though Demarco's optimism is starting to wane, his passion for art remains undiminished.

He holds the belief that “that which contains darkness also contains the prospect of light”.

The Edinburgh Festival was created in a time of general scarcity and political turmoil. Because of this, Demarco retains a faith that art will endure through uncertain times. The tragedies that Demarco sees looming are surmountable but will require great effort to ward off. Demarco's archive

manifests this cultural ambition.

The profound threat that looms over it is illustrative of deeper and wider threats in an era of [confusion and tragedy](#). What will win out? Demarco's gloomy prognosis of the state we are in – or the deep reservoir of faith in the power of art?

Quotations from Richard Demarco are from an interview conducted with him on 27 August 2024.