WHÔ’s afraid of Conceptual Art? That was the question asked this week in a BBC4 documentary presented by art historian, Dr James Fox. The answer, judging by the number of Scots that appeared in the show, was “certainly not Scots” - or at least not Scottish artists. For, of the five artists in the show held up as the pinnacle of conceptual art, four of them came from Scotland - the other was from Germany. This fact was not commented on in the show, though clearly it raises a series of questions. Why are Scots so good when it comes to conceptual art? When Fox, at the start of the show, says “Welcome to the puzzling, sometimes maddening world of conceptual art” should he really be saying “the puzzling, sometimes maddening world of Scottish conceptual art”?
Conceptual art, essentially, is art that prizes ‘the idea’ over the execution of the final object. Across the world there are countless conceptual artists, but the biggest “movers and shakers” Fox featured in his “open-minded guide for the perplexed”, hail from Scotland. When he looks for an example of a work which sums up what is so difficult about this type of art, he lands on Glasgow-raised Martin Creed’s Work No 88, a scrunched-up ball of A4 paper. He buys it for £180 and has it delivered to his house.

“This piece, Fox says, “perhaps encapsulates why so many people struggle with conceptual art. It doesn’t seem to require much skill. It’s not particularly beautiful. And ultimately it feels like a bit of a rip off. But maybe we’re all missing something.”

When he searches for an artist that was there when the movement took off in the sixties, he opts for Bruce McLean, Glasgow-born, and creator of a conceptual work called Pose Work For Plinths, in which he sat, leaned, draped and contorted himself on a series of white platforms as if he himself were the sculpture.

When he is looking for conceptual art which has reached beyond the galleries, art “that isn’t as pretentious and elitist as I once feared”, he hits on Robert Montgomery whose neon text work “The people you love become ghosts inside of you and like this you keep them alive” pulls up 4.9 million results online in 0.7 seconds. Mostly these are tributes to lost loved ones, sometimes tattooed in ink across people’s skin. It’s ust one of the highly effective text works which Montgomery has plastered over buildings across Europe. Others include: “ALL EUROPE MUST BE EVERY-WHERE – A REFUGE FOR THE BROKEN HEARTED”

Then, ultimately, when Fox ends his journey declaring that he finally gets conceptual art, it’s with Katie Paterson, the Glasgow-born 35-year-old who has created extraordinary works involving melting down a meteorite, mapping dead stars and arranging the wood of 100 species of trees. Fox describes her work as “sublime”. He raves about Totality, her work in which 10,000 images of solar eclipses are mounted on a mirrorball, as “intelligent and beautiful and hugely ambitious.”

‘Katie Paterson is one of the most exciting talents of my generation,” he says. “And for a few years now she’s been boldly going where no conceptual artist has gone before…. She’s even made music with celestial objects.” He refers to her most famous work: a piano automatically playing Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata after the piece of music has been sent into space by radio transmission, bounced off the moon, and received back down on earth, with some of the notes lost in the lunar craters.

Paterson, when she saw the documentary, says she was “stunned” at being placed in a history “with all those amazing artists”. One of the things that is striking about her art is how hard work it is. At the moment she is planning a book that will contain 150 ideas for works she reckons are almost unmakeable; her favourite, “an ice rink made out of water from every single glacier in the world”.

Like many of the artists featured in the show, she appears uncomfortable with labels. She’s not looking to be part of some conceptual scene. “For me it’s come from the heart somehow and it’s not really designed to be part of something or any movement. I’ve never really tried too hard to do anything other than let the ideas come, assess them in terms of their own value.”
For almost all of the artists, the words conceptual or even art seem irrelevant. McLean puts it: “I don’t get up in the morning to make some art. I get up in the morning to work out what the f**k I’m doing and why I made that painting like that and why did I do that. Where is it going to go? What’s it for? And why am I doing it anyway?”

In Who’s Afraid Of Conceptual Art? Martin Creed even says that he doesn’t consider his crumpled ball of paper to be art. Rather, he says, “It’s something that I did because I liked it… I thought it was worth doing… If something is exciting and it feels good that’s the test of things.” Is he serious? In a lot of conceptual art, the 'prank' lies at the heart of the work, so it is often hard to tell when an artist is joking, or if the art they produce is intended as a joke rather than a serious statement.

Scotland has definitely punched above its weight in the field of contemporary art. What art critic Hans Ulrich Obrist called the "Glasgow miracle" began in the 1990s, and the Glasgow School of Art turned out a generation of international contemporary artists, including Douglas Gordon, Nathan Coley, and a whole string of other Turner prize winners, many of them described as neo-conceptualists.

Yet this documentary featured no artists from Glasgow School of Art, save for McLean who went before its heyday and left in disgust. Robert Montgomery went to the Edinburgh College of Art to study painting, but left doing conceptual, text-based work. Katie Paterson went to Edinburgh College of Art and the Slade School of Art in London. Martin Creed also studied at the Slade. If we’re looking for an answer as to why so many Scots dominate in the world of conceptual art, we won’t find the answer purely in GSA. We have to Bruce McLean has his own thoughts on this: “I think Scottish artists, the good ones, have a certain kind of intelligence and humour. They are different from the Irish and the Welsh and English. I think it’s to do with the attitude.”

He also notes: “Martin Creed is a very serious artist, so is Douglas Gordon, so is [Katie Paterson], so am I. But there’s also a sense of play about us and humour, and a sort of Scottish intelligence, which is in all of us. I feel completely different to my English friends. I mean the Scots invented the world. They did.”

McLean believes that some of this is down to the Scottish approach to education, and its long history stretching back to the seventeenth century legislation that enforced the creation of schools in every parish. “That’s embedded in everybody, that idea that knowledge is free and learning is free. It’s not all about money. It’s about exchanging ideas and things”

Like McLean, Montgomery, a keen campaigner for public libraries, believes that education might have something to do with it. An English friend of his, he says, had always said that “when you meet Scottish kids in art school you can tell that their basic education is better than ours”.

Both of his grandfathers, he notes, were miners who had “the idea of education in their bones”.

Katie Paterson
“They told me,” he says, “that in the 1920s and 1930s miners used to go on strike for education not just working conditions.” He worries that the whole idea of socially-funded education is under threat, particularly in England, and that working-class kids are disappearing from the art schools.

Of course, conceptual art isn’t a fundamentally Scottish thing, but nevertheless, as this documentary has illustrated, Scots have been key in the movement. Why this is, we can only speculate. “There might be a certain otherness,” says Montgomery, “about being Scottish that possibly helps you to be deviant enough to be an artist.”

“I think Scots are less reverential towards the status quo,” says Bruce McLean. “We’re a little bit quizzical, looking at things sideways slightly, questioning everything really. We question things. Why is this this? What’s good about Katie Paterson is that she’s gone off the surface of the earth. She’s gone into outer space. And that’s where it’s got to go.”