

CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING IN THE SCOTISH CONTEXT

Observations

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The discussion here, as I understand it, is principally around our public collections, large and small, national, regional, municipal. I should start by saying that I come from the other side of the tracks, the private rather than the public sector, and in particular I speak with the voice of the artists that, as a gallery, we represent in the world. Part of the chain of supply, if you like, and in common with all such chains of supply we are dependent on demand... without demand, in this instance defined as a culture of collecting... we have a problem. I'll come back to some observations on the ambitions and aims of public sector collecting in a minute, but first I'd also like to say something about the private sector itself, and perhaps about collecting in a wider sense, beyond the public domain. The health, and to use the watchword of this seminar, 'sustainability' of these two distinct areas are not unrelated.

What I'm talking about here is the life-blood of the whole visual arts being... Without a diverse community of galleries, private as well as public, artist run as well as funded: the thing will die. If we have a vision of Scotland as a place for artists, a place that embraces artists and makes them feel valued - that makes them want to stay here, work here, even move here... if we have any sort of vision that involves a healthy Scottish arts

scene, then we have to understand that it cannot exist without a sustainable network of *private* galleries, galleries selling work - encouraging collecting at every level - and crucially building a culture where individuals feel that they have a part to play, where their involvement in contemporary art means something to them not just in their own life, but beyond their immediate circumstances. Involvement is the cradle of philanthropy. If you can take an individual and foster their interest in an artist's work and encourage them to see the benefit (for the artist, for the wider public, and indeed for them selves as a collector of that artist's work) if you can encourage them to see the benefit in presenting that artist in the context of a museum or public collection - then you are well on the way to that individual extending his or her support towards the institution.

This brokering - between artists and collectors, between collectors and institutions is what makes contemporary art tick the world over. Thanks to the energies and insights of people like Simon [Groom] it has begun to seed here, but there is still a long way to go. Simon mentioned Roland Penrose and Gabrielle Keiller and the advantage for a museum in cultivating good relationships with dealers and collectors - but these few examples aside there has not, historically, been a strong culture of public and private working together, indeed in my experience there is more likely to be uncertainty, even a degree of discomfort from museums and galleries over their relationship with private galleries, and perhaps this stems from a mistrust and misunderstanding of what

private galleries are for. So let me take a step back and say something about that...

As Amanda will remember when the SAC commissioned a national audit of artists' needs in 2003 the two areas that were consistently cited by artists as most important and (in the lack of them) most problematic, were the provision of affordable studio space and the need for a relationship with a private or commercial gallery - a gallery to sell their work and represent them in the wider world.

This may seem a bit obvious, but the understanding of it within the wider sector,, percolating down from artists, is relatively recent and I think in some areas we are still only just beginning to get our heads around what it means. There has, in the past, been a misunderstanding (and a really crass one at that) that private galleries, because they are businesses, are just about making money. And that private galleries (especially those that might appear from the outside to be successful) are not on the same side as everyone else.

Of course, in referring to private galleries, I'm talking about a specific type of private gallery here, the sort that nurtures and supports its artists, but as with all sectors of business they exist in many varied forms. The streets of Glasgow, and Edinburgh in particular, are quite well populated by picture shops - businesses selling art - but there are not so many contemporary art galleries of the sort that represent

artists in the way that artists need to be represented, if they are going to succeed on the world stage. There are half a dozen perhaps, in the whole country: Sorcha Dallas, Mary Mary and the Modern Institute here in Glasgow, Doggerfisher and ourselves in Edinburgh, and the reason, quite simply, that there are so few is that it is very hard to make it work. Which brings us back to the thing that feeds the system... A culture of collecting...

There is not, yet, a really strong culture of private collecting of contemporary art in Scotland. It is a healthier picture than say 10 years ago, but it still falls well short of what we need and ought to be able to achieve. There are plenty of people who might consider themselves collectors, who will buy a certain sort of picture for their walls at a certain level (and I'm not denigrating the importance of this) but we are a long way shy of being able to support a market for the sort of more challenging work that would be identified internationally as the important art being made in 21st century Scotland. The sort of work that ultimately we would like to see in our museums and public galleries: the future art history, which we must learn to support at home if we don't want to lose our artists to the rest of the world.

This of course is the work that curators are seeking for their collections, but that they can't always afford to buy - there's a sort of chicken / egg - horse / cart problem here - collectors enjoy the approbation of seeing the work that they support entering a public

collection, and might be minded to help it get there, but without the right sort of private galleries to show it to them in the first place, they aren't going to have made a personal connection with the artist and the work before it reaches the museum stage of the journey.

Happily, the signs are that we are getting a bit closer to understanding that we are all part of the same jigsaw: better at understanding the benefits of working together across the sector and more comfortable with the idea of an inter dependent 'art world'. One of the principle achievements of the Edinburgh Art Festival and Glasgow International over the last few years has been the greater sense of community that our very diverse institutions now share, and the rise in collaborative projects that this has enabled. Collaboration requires generosity and when purse strings are tightening generosity becomes a little harder to harness but even more valuable. Scotland is a small place, the visual art sector within Scotland even more so, and within this small orbit I think that the National Gallery has a very real responsibility to display a strong lead and a clear direction. I would suggest that it hasn't always been easy for them to do that in the realm of contemporary art, forming, as it does, such a partial element of what they have to offer the world as a whole, but perhaps the model of artist rooms may help to define that direction.

The D'Offay gift is important in this sense, not just because of the generosity that inspired it, but in the possibilities that it suggests for a different kind of generosity - a fluidity of sharing as Tina described it

in her introduction - a generosity of sharing and appreciation and collaboration and understanding of the ambassadorial potential of contemporary art - Bruce Nauman in Glasgow is one thing, Robert Mapplethorpe in Inverness or Bill Viola in Orkney is quite another.

Just as importantly, the D'Offay example is one that sends messages in all sorts of other interesting directions. In brokering the deal the government has opened up all sorts of possibilities: a potential collecting strategy is one - All collections are faced with the problem of what to collect, the NGS more so than most (Simon referred to the balance of chance and reason) but the possibility of collecting fewer artists in more depth is a very appealing idea - an artist's room... small but carefully chosen and in enough depth to present a coherent and intense experience that can then travel beyond the gallery to the wider world.

But perhaps the biggest sense of possibility that filters down from the D'Offay example, at least in relation to this afternoon's theme of sustainability in contemporary collecting, is the precedent that now exists for a lifetime gift of contemporary art to be looked at by the treasury against, or in lieu of tax. This is an idea that (officially) the government still shies from, but it is the thing that would make the single biggest difference to the culture of collecting in this country - the implementation of a system of tax breaks to support charitable giving of contemporary art to public institutions. No longer can the treasury say that they won't look at it - in the D'Offay example

(admittedly on a scale rather bigger than most) they have looked at it, they have done it, and the result is clearly brilliant for everyone. Pressure needs to be maintained by everyone in every aspect of the visual art community to encourage the government to roll this out in a wider way.

Pressure should also be applied towards the abolition of vat on sales of contemporary art. Something that is currently the gift of the treasury in Westminster, rather than Holyrood, but which should be put firmly on the agenda in anticipation of possible change. VAT is a tax on culture and its removal would simultaneously send a strong signal about the cultural worth of contemporary art and would present a financial incentive to collectors. It would also give Scottish galleries a useful advantage over some of our European neighbours and could both encourage the creation of new galleries within Scotland, and for existing galleries from outside Scotland to consider a Scottish presence.

In short, if we can begin to encourage individuals to make significant collections of contemporary art in Scotland then the logical next step is to look at what can be done to encourage those people to work supportively with our museums and public galleries. This would have a radical effect on those collections' ability to expand and deepen, and would help to rekindle the once great Scottish tradition of cultural philanthropy... the Andrew Carnegie moment that Tina referred to in the first words that we heard this afternoon.

ENDS.

Richard Ingleby,

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