

Contemporary Collections and Collecting in Scotland series

**Panel Discussion Summary Notes
May 29th 2009
Tramway, Glasgow**

Throughout 2009 the Scottish Arts Council and the History of Art Department at the University of Glasgow are organising three linked events, with the aim of engaging an invited audience in discussion about contemporary art collecting in Scottish museums and galleries. Together, the three events are intended to

- 1) Bring together and engage organisations and individuals who have a stake in the collecting of contemporary work
- 2) Recognise that achievements, priorities, perspectives, partnerships and responsibilities need to be articulated and shared, if museums and galleries in Scotland are to ensure and build on the presence of contemporary art in their collections for the long term.
- 3) Initiate and sustain productive critical discussion about the sustainability and future of public collections of contemporary art in Scotland.
- 4) Progress thinking about where responsibilities current lie, with whom they are to be identified, where they can be shared, and where they need to be fostered.

2. Panel event description

Over the last two years, the contemporary collecting landscape has evolved rapidly through initiatives such as ARTIST Rooms, Art Fund International and National Collecting Scheme Scotland. This has also been a period of change for sector bodies as such the Scottish Arts Council and Museums Galleries Scotland, and for organisations such as The Contemporary Art Society in London.

With this inaugural event, we sought to generate a clearer picture of this context, to provide a base line for further discussion. With this in mind, we conceived the panel event

- as a pretext to bring together representatives from the various agencies and development bodies, collecting institutions, public galleries, commercial galleries, as well as producers and artists for the first time;
- as a means to hear directly from a selection of perspectives, in order to begin generating a relative view of experiences, agendas and priorities, and, how they sit in relation to one another and to wider ambitions to build collections of contemporary art within Scotland.

The event was chaired by Mark O'Neill (Head of Arts and Museums, Culture Sport Glasgow). It included

- Amanda Catto, Head of Visual Arts, Scottish Arts Council
- Jane Robinson, Head of Museum Development, Museums Galleries Scotland
- Simon Groom, Director, SNGMA
- Victoria Hollows, Museum Manager, Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow
- Richard Ingleby, Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh
- Lucy Byatt, The Contemporary Art Society
- Christine Borland, Artist

3. Event summary

1) Insofar as the primary purpose of this first event was to provide an opportunity for those with a stake in future developments in public collecting of contemporary art to come together for the first time, it went some way to achieving this aim:

- 94 individuals from 50 organisations/institutions were invited.
- In total, 56 delegates - drawn from 32 different organisations - attended or participated in the panel event.
- Another 14 of those directly invited (including a further 3 organisations) replied that they were not able to attend on this occasion, but would attend further events.
- Delegates attended from Orkney, Aberdeen, Perth, Dundee, Stirling, London, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Paisley

2) In terms of forming an overview of experiences, priorities and agendas, seven speakers spoke for seven minutes each, and, between them, broaching:

- Existing models and initiatives for developing and presenting contemporary collections in Scotland: conveying different perspectives on the opportunities and the robustness of process that these have offered
- The lack of committed funding or support for research & travel to underpin collecting activity, or the capacity within institutions to use research to full advantage for those organisations and their audiences
- The beneficial organisational challenges and impacts of contemporary collecting experienced by those institutions building such collections
- The importance of advocating the cultural worth of contemporary art, for instance, to local authority leaders
- The need to articulate what is being offered through contemporary collecting - for institutions and for their relationships with their audiences and with artists
- The need to maximise on the interdependence of the art world and sense of community as evident in Scotland, and what possibilities for co-ordination or collaboration can be enabled from this
- The desire to promote principles of collective working, and the linking of collections nominally within the rationale of a 'distributed national collection'
- Commissioning as a process that has much to offer institutions; as one that promotes creative engagement, and as such has a role to play at the heart of what they do
- The need to develop a culture of private patronage in Scotland, and the respective roles of commercial and public galleries alike in this respect
- Priorities for policy development for contemporary collections and collecting in Scotland and the issue of national strategy formation

4. Key points from discussion

1. The sustainability of contemporary collecting requires a shift in the perceived cultural worth of contemporary art

- The cultural worth of contemporary collecting - for institutions and for their relationships with their audiences and with artists - needs to be articulated and promoted
- Endorsement from the Scottish Government in support of wider ambitions to build public collections of contemporary art, building on their investment in Artist Rooms, is crucial for the longer term

2. Collecting when viewed as an isolated activity is not sustainable

- Contemporary collecting and the ways of working that it requires must be promoted as part of a continuum of activities that affect all aspects of what museums and galleries do, what they offer and what they represent
- Public collections could be much more closely related to broader programmes of commissioning and exhibitions as developed by non-collecting venues, as well as the processes of research that underpin them, and particularly where public investment supports these

3. Strategic development of contemporary collecting requires joined up working

- Models and initiatives such as ARTIST ROOMS, Art Fund International, Commission to Collect and NCSS comprise a textured picture and support a range of principles – local, joint and shared ownership
- Understanding the checks and balances between them is critical in identifying the areas for future investment and policy development

4. Sustainability of contemporary collecting is related to sustainability of other areas of investment and activity

- A sustainable culture of public collecting in Scotland requires a sustainable network of private galleries
- The role of the private collector and the development of an incentivised culture of private collecting is crucial in discussions about the sustainability of public collecting

5. Selected feedback

‘The delegates were a wide cross section but I think most of the questions came from those in museums. How to join that specialist visual arts sector (projects and commissions) with the museum collecting side? ... The levels of funding by Arts Councils to enable temporary commissions huge, and far outweigh support for collecting by museums – Exhibition/agency and Museum curatorial expertise could come together to commission, ... and funding could go further?’

‘I was interested to find out more about the relationship between The Common Guild and GoMA, and discover whether this constitutes a useful model for the pairing of commissioning/collecting institutions.’

‘... as part of a non collecting department, we are mainly interested in what opportunities there are to work with / or be mindful of collecting policies when we are working with artists. The examples where people were speaking about commissioning and acquisitions was also informative and showed the complexities as well as the benefits of the two processes.’

‘I was prompted to return to a long-running theme in my mind about how to bring about a more robust culture of collecting. I have always thought that private collecting might provide an important alternative support model for artists and that this might be a rationale for its development to be publicly funded in some way.’

‘Audiences – this came up a few times on Friday but ... it would be very interesting to think some more about this on several levels; firstly are curators thinking about a particular local audience when they buy new work for their collections? Secondly how are the galleries involved in NCSS engaging audiences with these new additions to the collection, particularly the more challenging work? Is there a way of collecting, reflecting and sharing good practice in interpretation techniques that the galleries are using?’

‘Gallery education: ... Given that gallery educators are involved with visitors on a daily basis it would be interesting to hear about any projects that the galleries have undertaken using the new work bought through NCSS – are there any specific challenges and training needs that have been identified by galleries through education projects?’

6. Organisations represented at the event

Aberdeen Art Gallery
Art Fund
BBC Scotland
Contemporary Art Society
Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, Exhibitions Department
Edinburgh Art Festival
Edinburgh City Art Centre
Edinburgh Printmakers
Engage Scotland
Glasgow International
Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow
Glasgow School of Art, Exhibitions Department`
Glasgow Sculpture Studio
Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow
Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh
Map Magazine
McManus: Dundee's Art Gallery
Museums Galleries Scotland
National Fund for Acquisitions
National Galleries of Scotland
Paisley Museum and Art Gallery
Perth Museum and Art Gallery
Pier Arts Centre, Orkney
Scottish Arts Council
Scottish Parliament Art Collection
Sorcha Dallas, Glasgow
Streetlevel, Glasgow
The Changing Room, Stirling
Tramway
University of Glasgow, History of Art Department
VAGA
Wendy Law Art