

Contemporary Collections and Collecting in Scotland series

Event two: Perspectives on European Collections Introduction

I am pleased to welcome you all here today for the second of three meetings that together form the *Contemporary Collections and Collecting in Scotland* series for 2009, and I am delighted to welcome, in particular, our speakers for today: Eva Gonzalez-Sancho, Antonia Maria Perello, Christiane Berndes and Bik Van der Pol.

I am Tina Fiske, and I am Research Associate attached to the National Collecting Scheme Scotland, which is an initiative that supports seven public collections across Scotland to acquire and present challenging contemporary visual art. The initiative also seeks to enable curators within those organisations to extend their knowledge and understanding of contemporary visual arts, and to develop their engagement with the visual arts sector in Scotland.

My post is funded by the Scottish Arts Council, and I am based at the University of Glasgow. My role came into being in 2007 following the completion of the first phase of the National Collecting Scheme Scotland, which the Arts Council funded and the Contemporary Art Society originated and administrated between 2003 and 2006.

This series of events have come about through this association between the Scottish Arts Council and History of Art Department. Just very briefly to recap for those in the audience who were not able to attend the first event that took place in May and are not fully aware of the series: it consists of three linked events, which have the cumulative aim of engaging an invited audience in a sustained discussion about the future of public collections of contemporary art in Scotland.

This is timely insofar we have here in Scotland arguably reached something of a crossroads: as a result of substantial strategic public and third sector investment in both institutions and individuals in terms of collections and knowledge, work by an ever widening range of contemporary artists can now be accessed through the collections and programmes of Scottish museums and galleries - local and national. Indeed Scottish-based artists or those who established their practice in Scotland - such as Douglas Gordon, Simon Starling, Martin Boyce, Henry Coombes, Alex Heims, Cathy Wilkes, Jim Lambie and Rosalind Nashashibi - are now represented in public collections here in Scotland, as well as abroad. Similarly, where international artists such as Olafur Eliasson, Mark Dion, Johanna Billings, Camilla Løw and Catherine Yass have been invited to create new work or stage exhibitions at galleries in Scotland, wider audiences are able to encounter examples of their work within the context of their public museums and galleries.

In Scotland and across the UK more widely, the development of public collections of contemporary art has long been sporadic and subject to regular

hiatus through a combination of factors including lack of funding or political will, or because of institutional disposition. The acquisition of ARTIST ROOMS in 2007 by NGS and Tate will go some way to remedying the lack of international dimension to the modern and contemporary holdings of many British collections. And relatedly, Art Fund International is supporting five partnerships with major investment to establish core holdings of work by international artists. As one of the recipients, Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow is working with The Common Guild on the development of its international acquisitions – works by Emily Jacir, Matthew Buckingham, Lothar Baumgarten and Peter Hujar having now entered GoMA's collection.

All things considered, it seems as though the work of contemporary artists has gained a more visible place within our museums and galleries, valued by those institutions and their audiences alike. However, it remains an equivocal position. Many of the public institutions in Scotland that collect contemporary art continue to experience that same sense of precariousness, in the shape of ever diminishing funding for continued acquisitions and a lack of capacity or resources to support ways of working. Importantly, through this series, we have begun to look at how these issues – well-known to us, might best be articulated or represented in a collective way, and how opportunities for more sustainable ways of working might present themselves through more joined-up thinking. In Scotland, we have a small, but highly interdependent and influential visual arts sector, with a great deal of 'enabling' power and across which issues pertaining to collections and collecting reach. An objective of this series is to look at how a regular forum drawing together the various agencies

and development bodies, collecting institutions, public galleries, commercial galleries, or artists might be established and what it might do.

The first meeting, a panel event that took place in May, was designed to bring in to view policy, practice and perspectives with a particular bearing upon public collections of contemporary art in Scotland, and to initiate productive critical discussion about what it will take to enable their future. The third meeting, planned for December, will return to these particular strands, but another aim of this programme of events is also to generate debate of a more discursive kind, which can be mindful of the critical practice that institutions in contexts elsewhere in Europe are developing around the formation and presentation of their collections - with the hope that this in turn may inform debate on ambition and issues of policy and practice here in Scotland.

Writing in 1997, artist and critic Pavel Buchler noted:

Whatever their individual interests, it is unlikely that Scotland's cultural institutions ... could provide more than a limited support to the uncompromising commitments of artists who know that the identity of living culture cannot be constrained by geography, let alone by the priorities of municipal politics. Granted, these artists' work should be collected and made more readily available—not because it is Scottish, but because it is often very good. It also is, in many instances and in the most positive sense of the terms, European and international¹.

¹ Buchler, Pavel, (1997), 'Bad News', *Variant*, 2, Spring, accessed at <http://www.variant.randomestate.org/issue2.html>, retrieved 03 04 2003.

Some 12 years on, we are arguably now in a better position to reflect upon Buchler's claims here, not least in regarding his 'limited support' prognosis, and how achievements since and onward ambitions might defined in relation to it. We might also reflect on how the endeavour to collect new work and to make it 'more readily available' – Buchler's own words - remains to be recast as an institution's own 'uncompromising commitment.'

To that end, this second event was conceived as a means to begin learning more about other institutions, particularly those that are 'municipal' or 'regional' and starting with those that have achieved a position that is simultaneously 'local and 'international', and that have developed critical approaches to their collections and programmes of display, as well as their institutional histories and contexts of operation. This is with the intention of understanding how they put their collecting into practice or their collections into space – be that physical or discursive space, or indeed the creative space of the artist.

Today Eva, Antonia and Christiane will talk about the collections they work with respectively. We will also hear from Liesbeth Bik and Jos Van der Pol, artists who as Bik Van der Pol have developed several critical projects around or derived from public as well as private collections

Firstly, Eva and Antonia will speak and then we will have a short Q&A.

Following lunch, Christiane, Liesbeth and Jos will speak, followed by a short question session and wider discussion.

The afternoon session will be chaired by Katrina Brown. Katrina is Director of The Common Guild, a visual arts organization based in Glasgow, presenting an international programme of artists' projects, events and exhibitions. From 1997-2007, she was Curator and Deputy Director of Dundee Contemporary Arts, where she curated major solo projects with Olafur Eliasson, Christine Borland, Roddy Buchanan, Ernesto Neto, Miroslaw Balka, Thomas Demand, Richard Wright and Marine Hugonnier. She is currently Director of GI 2010 and 2012, and is a member of the Comite Technique d'Achat, FRAC des Pays de la Loire. She has previously also been an advisor to the Arts Council Collection 2007-2009.