

# Party Swings and Roundabouts

As The Scottish Arts Council (SAC) Visual Arts Department appoints Sue Daniels, former director at Oriol Mostyn, as the new Head of Department, following on from Andrew Nairne's resignation of the post and his installation as Director at the new Dundee arts centre, the department is holding *consultative* exercises on its proposed Support for Individual Visual Artists: Draft Action Plan. The Draft Action Plan and supporting material addresses what the SAC Visual Arts department feel are the "...key issues facing visual artists in Scotland". The responses to the document, through a consultative system, are intended to inform future SAC policy decisions on provision for artists. I suggest further, that through conscious reflection, it could also aid in the development of the SAC's own operating structures. In all, there are four such consultative meetings taking place throughout Scotland in Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dumfries, and Inverness.

Having participated as facilitator in the Glasgow meeting, I am left questioning the informative role these exercises have. Not just in the scope of the exercises themselves (the actual consultative structure; the problems of the representation of a broader community by a limited number of individuals; only one afternoon to discuss the breadth of issues facing the plethora of artistic communities in the Central Belt; the scarcity of such events as ongoing exercises of communication) but in the actual SAC receiving structure, how this information is potentially fed back into the SAC and acted upon by individual Officers, and what effects it has on the SAC's own mechanisms of working. There is a feeling that such consultative exercises simply fulfil the role of making *visible*, and thereby proving, in a limited way if not only for the SAC's own reference, the existence of a benign, democratic organisation, the worry of participants being, they are taken through the motions to a pre-ordained conclusion. The histories of previous exercises inform this sentiment. To grasp a positive element from the proceedings, I welcome my opportunity to play witness to and participate in the event and, being engaged in drawing up the consultative group, invite others to participate who might not have had the occasion otherwise. It was an opportunity to become privy to explanations possibly not so forthcoming in the otherwise *everyday* circumstances of the running of the Department. In view of this, the SAC Visual Arts Department's openness and approachfulness has to be challenged, as should the present limited *client* representative consultation structure, in the expectation that other ways of representing and supporting a multiplicity of practices can be explored in an ongoing exchange of ideas. Within the meeting I attempted to raise the issues of what the present and future roles of the SAC are considered to be, outside of any one departments' manoeuvring within its prescribed, narrow categorisation, in relation to the Governments reduced capita for Public Sector Funding (PSF) of the arts, the Lottery and the *encouragement* for arts organi-

sations to attain private sector funding.

The Support for Individual Visual Artists: Draft Action Plan *converses* in the language of capital economy. The whole tone of the document is the recommendation of the twinning of private capital with public subsidy. This comes with the now inevitable continuation of an inherited Conservative Government funding policy of encouraged private *investment* in the arts with the continual erosion of Public Sector Funding (PSF). To receive Lottery funding (the replacement system for PSF by any other name) relies on the applying organisation finding a discretionary percentage of funding from 'other sources'. Forget previous Lottery promises this is, after all, *New Labour* with new promises. Camelot, the company who presently run the Lottery for the Government, hold the commercial reins until 2001, when its franchise is to be reviewed. In the meantime, the Government is making loud noises in public on the changes it intends to style from the present commercial set-up to a non-profit making system come 2002. Against the backdrop of years of Tory cuts; two years of *frozen* Government funding to the Scottish Office for the SAC to come (under Labour's committed spending promises) and its *replacement* system, Lottery funding, to decrease with Labour's alternative spending plans for the money raised by the Wednesday Draw (*more* justifiably using the money for Education and Welfare), what was *on offer* at the consultation was a discussion on the prioritising of artists' needs. Ultimately this was how to cut what can only be a diminishing cake in response to the artists' practices the SAC wish to, and feel they can, support. In the light of this continuing funding crisis, the SAC expressed the desire to redirect funding away from *administration* within the visual arts to *individual* artists as one possible *solution*.

Amongst other things suggested, this could take the form of: moving funds around to make more money available for individual SAC artists' project grants; organisations/ galleries creating more fellowships and residencies in association with the SAC; the SAC insisting that revenue funded clients implement Exhibition Payment Rights (EPR - a fee for artists showing their work over and above the costs of the exhibition, hanging, invites, catalogue, etc.). It is suggested that such recommendations would be achieved at different rates, from easily achievable to long term goals. The merit of these recommendations have to be assessed both individually and in relation to their overall effect. Initially, however, what needs to be looked at is how the very document actually came about, the time scales, applicability and relevance of the SAC research and development exercises that went into creating the suggested solutions. There is no point in developing and consulting on policy that is potentially outmoded even at such a draft stage, never mind in five years time. To take Exhibition payment Rights as one example. The SAC endorsed the National Artists Association (NAA) Code of Practice document in 1995, which includes the implementation of EPR, and participated in the original research exercises in association with the NAA. While the research and resulting documents have allowed the NAA to campaign for EPR from a relatively persuasive position, EPR as SAC policy looks none the closer. While a few galleries in Scotland presently manage to pay EPR, e.g. Street Level Gallery, The Collective Gallery, through their individual commitment to the scheme and financial balancing acts, the scheme was developed in relation to a specific way of working and is biased towards the one or two

person gallery show. In the light of contemporary practice the EPR scheme needs overhauling to be more inclusive of other ways of working. The principle of EPR is otherwise compromised through its hierarchical payment structure, defined against the backdrop of the commercial gallery system and applicable to only a few. Projects which often show groups of *emerging* artists in *alternative* spaces in relatively short sporadic intervals, would not be able to give their participants equivalent support under the present recommended EPR scheme. In the eventuality of EPR being *implemented* (that is, not just in SAC revenue funded spaces but across a wide range of practices which engage with a range of publics), it could potentially allow for a greater number of organisations to make their *own* 'qualitative' judgements and endorsements. That is not to say that those funded by the SAC would not still feel the effects exerted by the SAC's own 'qualitative' tastes, which encompasses overtly bureaucratic assessment procedures where validation means conformation to specific forms within pigeonholes that fit present departmental remits or the *current* round of concerns, e.g. 'education and interpretation'. Some of the suggestions within the Strategy Document do *potentially* increase financial support from the SAC for a greater number of individual practitioners which is a constructive action, but that is not to say that this will not in some way affect provision for the facilities for the *making* of work, as production facilities are potentially described as *administration* and where extra funds will be sought from.

In the meeting, participants spoke primarily from an individual geographic and personal basis. In itself this is not necessarily negative provided the consultative structure allows for frequent and broad community representation. However, it did prove problematic for a discussion on the wider National implications of moving funding to artists away from administration, visualising where these changes would take place and who they would have most impact upon. While I understand this was not the intention of this specific consultative exercise, these broader concerns have wide reaching implications for the production of work and ultimately influence any SAC funding policy decisions made. Perhaps other reasons why a broader discussion of *the general picture* didn't emerge are because of the differences and complexities of the cultural scenes within Scotland; the specific focus and concerns of any one individual/ group present and, paramount, the internal competition for limited funds. The effect of such competition is manifest throughout the visual arts, no more so as in the education *industry*, as witnessed at a recent opening of an exhibition in Glasgow. An Art School head of department was giving an opening speech and, unable or unwilling to talk about the work on show, followed close on the heels of the Conservative's election tactics of negative campaigning by 'bringing into disrepute' the workings of another department. I far from expect ideological homogeneity in the arts, arts education, art magazines, critical journals, etc. but such *petty* bickering is self-defeating. I wonder how much Tory divide and conquer policy has been absorbed over the years and how much it ever needed encouraging. This myopic scramble for funding and *academic* accreditation inevitably impacts upon the potential for any intelligent debate and discussion.

Over and above the SAC's grand plan for Centres of Excellence (designating specific regional areas in Scotland with *quality* provision for a specific artistic medium), which was not discussed at any length at the meeting, we have to understand how individual artists and organisations manage to survive and produce work in the present funding climate, what the nature of those organisations are, their historic development, and what support they also provide for a broad range of practices. Artist Run Spaces may well be a sweeping term but most *employ* artists in some capacity, however underpaid for their work. Overall, the contemporary gallery structure employs artists in a variety of positions, both paid and voluntary. One *trend* which has a strong emphasis in the Strategy document is the

employing of trainees in arts organisations. This emphasis on training, however differently structured, is discussed in an anonymous letter in the Spring 97 issue of Circa magazine, Dole Fraud and the Arts. It states: "Firstly, and paradoxically, practically all full-time positions within the arts are filled temporarily by trainees. This has been the only way that theatres, art centres etc. have managed to function, but the result is that there are no jobs - they are all filled by trainees." Out of financial necessity many arts organisations employ voluntary staff. This has taken on a new dimension at Glasgow's Museum of Modern Art, where the voluntary Gallery Guides are asked to become Friends of the Gallery, for a 'standard' fee of £15, before being *allowed* the privileged task of instructing the public on the art within the building. I don't think its too much to claim that such schemes can, in the present economic climate, produce and add to an environment of structural unemployment, especially when looked at in the light of the recent staff redundancies at Glasgow Museums.

The close relative to training within the document is the SAC's now familiar mouth foaming zeal for *professionalism*. Professionalism here is seen to be the art of contractually liaising with business; in having contractual relationships the artist is believed to be somehow *empowered*, in control of their own destiny. While this gets away from the view of the artist-as-victim, it doesn't explain the actual power relations at play in the field of cultural production and the direct influences of corporate sponsorship. Business sponsorship of the arts is described in Culture as Commodity; The Economics of the Arts and Built Heritage in the UK, Bernard Casey, Rachael Dunlop, Sara Selwood: "Businesses sponsoring the arts normally expect certain benefits in return. These include promotion and advertising opportunities, such as entertaining clients and VIPs, access to specific markets, the enhancement of their corporate image by association with a prestigious event, and the possibility of boosting staff morale by providing free or discounted tickets. Sponsorship is generally regarded as part of a company's promotional expenditure and is normally allowable for tax purposes." An Art School's student handout on writing company sponsorship applications describes What Companies May Want Out of a Sponsorship as, "an event which is high profile, *media* worthy and reflects *corporate values*...; a deal capable of *future exploitation*." [writers emphasis]. So it's hardly worth writing to Shell asking it to support artists' works on human rights violations in Nigeria, or is it? As Chomsky asserts, democracies, while far from being democratic, actively and visibly encourage and tolerate open dissent/ criticism, as do multinational corporations. While private businesses benefit from a direct correlation between themselves and the apparent freedom of the arts, reciprocally the perpetuated myth of the 'free-market' is also used to naturalise the administered hierarchy within the arts market. Through *business* education at college level and training thereafter it is believed 'professionalism' will be achieved. This linear model of practice is the result of a 'traditionalist' model of art history and the attempt to lay a specific capital economy grid over the breadth of contemporary art practice. It's not by chance that it also reflects the Conservative *vocational* educational policies of the 80s and 90s. (In London, the art department of Camberwell was closed and Central and St. Martins were amalgamated, a more up to date euphemism would be down-sized, by Government decisions taken in the late 80s because they couldn't justify their existence *vocationally*. In reality these acts were symptomatic of the Government's paranoid projection and attempts at the destruction of the *left* within public institutions.)

The SAC's Visual Arts Department's apparent desire for administration cuts also conflicts with the present private *managerial* system that is developing, that of devolved/ private Lottery facilitating companies and the SAC's own policy study into an independent/ private arts education body (a private body to administer artists working within education). As more funding

facilitating organisations *appear* to *negotiate* on organisations' behalves the contradiction of the SAC's will to shift funding from *administration* to *artists* changes from a mere rip to a gaping chasm in realistic policy possibilities, despite the conviction of some SAC Officers and Committee members, as it flies in the face of the effects of Government Arts policy. But, *administration* is a broad encompassing term, the actuality is that certain forms of *administrative* structures are being encouraged over and above others. Presented within the document is financial encouragement from the SAC to be given to individuals/ groups for setting up private dealer organisations, an administrative body.

I believe the SAC put forward a Darwinistic notion of artistic practice, a system of natural competition and selection that 'sorts the men from the boys'. The SAC present an idealist representation of the *creator* as a *pure* isolated subject and the SAC as being in a position of disinterestedness, mere observers removed from the fray. In the introduction to Pierre Bourdieu's The Field of Cultural Production Randal Johnson writes: "We would be naive to assume that it [the structure of authority in the field of cultural production] is innocent or disinterested. As Bordieu writes '...Every critical affirmation contains, on the one hand, a recognition of the value of the work which occasions it...and on the other hand an affirmation of its own legitimacy. All critics declare not only their judgements of the work but also their claim to the right to talk about it and judge it. In short, they take part in a struggle for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art, and consequently in the production of the value of the work of art.' There is, as Bourdieu has said, an interest in disinterestedness." What is camouflaged is the actual regulation of the manufacturing as well as dissemination of cultural production by the SAC. The mechanisms of 'qualitative' judgement is the belief system that sustains this apparent natural system of the selection and promotion of artists. Part of the notion of *professionalism* contains this naturalised, unspoken concept of *quality* and *value*, which is disseminated throughout the art world.

The SAC operates in a reactive capacity, it is *familiar* with and able to validate that which is already sanctioned and confirms/ accumulates that accreditation. Through such a methodology it cannot, or is unwilling to in its present incarnation, support innovation and experimentation as it contradicts its system of judgement. The SAC must therefore develop *its* own supportive and communicative structures in response to contemporary artistic practices *if* it is to truly advance its provision for artists. One suggestion in the Support for Individual Visual Artists: Draft Action Plan is that a bursary be given to an existing, unstated UK/ International arts magazine, I presume based in London as it is the concentrated market centre, to support Scottish writing on Art. While its heartening to eventually see a glimmer of *encouragement* for critical writing, if that *is* what is sought, running to the familiar and sanctioned within London is still a poor substitute for the development of independent activity within Scotland.

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