



Highlands & Islands VISUAL ARTS FORUM

The Artist and the Gallery

Speakers: Denise Collins (Director, Castle Gallery, Inverness),
Norah Campbell (Director, An Tuireann, Skye).

Below are notes from a talk and discussion that took place at the Highlands & Islands Visual Arts Forum, which took place in Dingwall in January 2002.

The objectives of the session were to clarify the different roles of the public and commercial galleries of the region, to promote an understanding of what artists should expect from galleries and, conversely, what galleries expect of artists.

Public Galleries

Norah Campbell, Director of *An Tuireann Arts Centre* in Portree, Isle of Skye, spoke first about the role of public galleries.

Norah said that the main role of *An Tuireann* was to promote a wider understanding of the contemporary arts and, indeed, this was a condition of their funding. Within this remit, *An Tuireann* presents a balanced programme of work by local, national and international artists.

Public galleries perform this educational role by trying to remove barriers to art work, which is done by ensuring a free entry policy, and by providing an environment in which there is no pressure on the public to purchase artwork. A new Education Officer post at *An Tuireann* further ensures that contemporary or "difficult" work can be accessed through quality interpretative material, a programme of talks or workshops.

Public galleries also play a supportive role within the local community by undertaking outreach work with schools and community groups, bringing the *Travelling Gallery* up to more remote areas, and providing master-classes in varying artistic techniques for the local artistic community.

Public galleries can provide a professional space and environment in which artists can exhibit their work, and most will endeavour to pay artists professional fees for the public display of their art, and to cover travel expenses and the costs incurred in creating commissioned pieces.

However, public galleries demand the same professionalism from artists, as the artists would expect from the galleries themselves. When public galleries agree to display and promote the work of artists, the gallery needs to ensure that the work is well made and innovative, and that it will be delivered on time. Many public galleries, therefore, will enter into a formal contract with the exhibiting artist.

In terms of opportunities for local artists, *An Tuireann* programme regular open exhibitions for local artists, and have on occasion curated whole shows around a number of local artists' work. The gallery will promote these shows through publicity material, previews and in the media.

The gallery runs regular art workshops for accomplished artists, as well as for novices, and provides opportunities for local artists to network with each other. *An Tuireann* also keeps a local artists register for Skye which is on display year-round, as well as providing an artists opportunities board within the centre.

Norah also said that it was the role of the public galleries, whilst not being a commercial space, to communicate the value and worth of art, and to promote the professionalism of many visual artists practitioners.

An Tuireann also hope to create opportunities for artist residencies at the centre in future.

In short, it should be the role of the public gallery to encourage and empower artists to be the best that they can be, and to make the art that they want to make.

Commercial/Private Galleries

Denise Collins of *Castle Gallery*, a recently established private gallery in Inverness, then spoke about the role of commercial galleries.

She said that whereas the keyword for public galleries seemed to be “education”, private galleries come from a very different direction. To survive, their primary mission must be to sell artwork at a profit. However, in doing this, Denise maintained that it was the responsibility of the private gallery to promote a friendly atmosphere for visitors for the gallery – especially for the 80% of visitors who will not necessarily make a purchase.

Commercial galleries do not operate in a vacuum, and could not survive without the work of artists, and many artists could not operate without private galleries to provide an accessible sales channel and marketing role on their behalf. Artists who want to make a living from their work need to find a good commercial gallery. However, there will always be more artists looking for galleries to exhibit their work than there are galleries available to show it.

Therefore, the initial approach that an artist makes to a gallery is crucial to whether they are successful or not. The key issues facing artists approaching galleries are as follows:

- Artists should assess their own work and its suitability before starting to approach private galleries – for instance, has your artwork reached a stage where it is ready for exposure in a gallery?
- Artists should research into a wide range of galleries to ensure that the one that they approach is suitable for their own style and accessibility of work. Research can be done by visiting galleries, looking in brochures/on web sites, or by checking out visual art magazines.
- Artists must be ready to part with their precious artworks once they are on display in a private gallery – are you able to step back from your creation and have it sold to someone who might not “understand” it as you do?
- Ready to approach a gallery? Then make sure you prepare your application in a professional manner, ensure that you enclose a brief CV and artist’s statement, alongside good quality representations of between ten and twelve recent artworks, along with details of their dimensions, medium, and the price that you personally would like to get from the work (the artist’s price). Be sure to include an SAE for a response, or for the gallery to return your work.

If the work is up to scratch, there are still some barriers to being accepted by a gallery. These include:

- Bad handwriting in your application.
- Badly presented or badly photographed slides.
- Don’t appear in front of a gallery director unannounced and expect them to drop everything to look at your work!

When you have sent or dropped off your application, if the gallery has not contacted you for a number of months, contact them to get your work back, but prepare to be disappointed.

Denise said that the work of 90% of artists applying to the Castle Gallery is not suitable for the gallery, so do not be too disheartened!

So what can you expect if you are amongst the lucky 10% of artists who the gallery wants to take on? First off all, your work will probably be displayed in a mixed exhibition showcasing a number of artists. Galleries want to be sure that they can establish a track record in selling your work before embarking upon greater things. Once your work begins to sell regularly, you will often be offered a solo exhibition.

Once you are with a private gallery, you should ensure that you are clear about how commission fees work. Most galleries will ask for between 33% and 50% of your work sales to go towards their running costs. Commissions should reflect how much work galleries are doing on your behalf. Therefore, if you find that a gallery is taking a 50% commission, this will often be because they are spending money on promoting you through printed material, press releases, previews of your work, etc. If you are being charged a high commission, and do not feel you are getting any of these benefits, you may be at the wrong gallery, and should look elsewhere!

You should also ensure that you know whether it is the gallery or yourself that is responsible for: insurance, transportation, organising previews/invitations, etc.

Ideally, artists should enter into a formal contract with the gallery that is representing them to clarify all these responsibilities and arrangements. There is no reason why an artist shouldn't draw up his or her own contract with the gallery, if the gallery is not forthcoming in producing a contract.

In short, the key to a good working relationship between artists and galleries must involve professionalism and mutual respect.

Questions & Answers

Below are a number of points that came out of the question and answer session:

- Although galleries have a responsibility to hold the names and addresses of buyers, they have no responsibility to disclose these to the relevant artists, as this may allow the artist to sell straight to the customer to avoid paying the gallery commission.
- Artists retain the copyright and moral rights on their work (unless they assign them) after it has been purchased (i.e. there are safeguards against buyers mass-producing your work).
- A number of artists reported problems with galleries paying them for their sales on time. It was suggested that payment dates should form part of the contract between artist and gallery.
- Insurance for commercial galleries has increased dramatically in past years, which means that insurance of work by the gallery may not always be guaranteed in future. Artists should check these details.
- The National Artists Association created a template for visual arts contracts, and the SAC can also provide free templates for contracts. Contact the SAC help desk for details.
- Galleries can offer artists advice on setting the commercial value of their work. The ultimate selling price vs artist price will need to be negotiated between artist and gallery.
- Public galleries need to retain editorial control over the content of their exhibitions. Although public galleries are well known for showing cutting-edge work, they are also sensitive to their local community, and will not exhibit work that may do lasting damage to the perception of the gallery within the community.
- Gordon Rogers of Art.tn contrasted commercial and public galleries by saying that commercial galleries look to build up a reliable "stable" of artists, whilst public galleries

provide a spring-board for new and innovative artists, often only working with each artist a few times.

- It was noted that Art Schools still do not equip students with a grounding in business and promotional skills that are needed – especially in more remote areas such as the Highlands and Islands. The SAC are currently looking at mentoring schemes for artists, and Skye and Lochalsh Enterprise have offered a “How to make a living from Art” session in the past.
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