David Cotterrell: Bridging the Gap (v)

Event Name: VAGA Symposium: Making the Case
Venue/Location: Tate Modern
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Supporting Organisation(s):
VAGA, The Visual Arts and Galleries Association

Chair/Other Speakers:
Jude Kelly (Artistic Director Southbank Centre), Samuel Jones (editor of recent Demos publication Expressive Lives), Lina Dzuverovic (Director Electra), Hilary Gresty (VAGA Director)

A short presentation prepared for the VAGA symposium, Making the Case. The audience was comprised of gallery and museum directors, commissioners, consultants and local government representatives.

In the last year the economic and political landscape has altered radically, with an impactacross society that will come in different forms and at different times. Now is the time for newthinking and reassessment on the part of the arts sector as well as policy makers. The squeezeon public spending is already evident and the visual arts have predictably been subject toadverse press scrutiny. (In contrast new research from Arts and Business suggests thatindividual giving to the arts is and will remain healthy.) In addition the challenges of climatechange become more urgent, the tensions between global and regional/local remain and theopportunities offered by new technologies grow - the list could go on....

What are the opportunities as well as the challenges and what are the priorities in theimmediate and longer term for the arts sector and for policy makers? How do we as acommunity of practice and vision meet the challenges, decide what is needed to make the mostof this 360 degree moment to the advantage of all, and make the case to policy makers, opinionformers and others especially in the lead up to the General Election and subsequent spendingreview?

Hilary Gresty, VAGA Director

Transcript of Presentation:

I am an artist and an adviser to a embryonic professional association for artists, AIR, whichcurrently has over 12,800 members. I am speaking here without any pretensions to offering acomprehensive over-view of the practitioner perspective, but simply to propose one anecdotaland subjective view from within a broad and eclectic community. I have for the first timewritten down some thoughts before speaking. As I tend to write much less than I speak, I amexpecting this presentation to be quite brief.

In my opinion, artists have an advantage when confronted with political and economic crises.If they manage to sustain themselves through the first five years of their practice, artists tendto work to a different time-scale to many businesses. While conscious of the proximity ofshort-term demands, anxieties and opportunities, many artists consider their career as a singlelong-term project - affected like all other members of society - yet not dictated by election cycles,growth forecasts, business plans, fashion trends and annual targets. This communityhas heavily invested in itself through training with a disproportionately large number beingeducated to BA, MA and increasingly PHd levels. It is a community, which continuallyinvests almost all of its income back into research and infrastructure. However despite itsscale, it remains a little intangible. While we can identify the symptoms and exemplars ofcultural vitality through the locations and structures of institutions like this one (TateModern), it is much more challenging to

map the location and health of the tens of thousandsof active practitioners within the country, which foster the creative potential that justifiesthese castles of culture. In a recent survey of the AIR artist members, 72% of practitionersdeclared themselves to be self-employed, while advertised funded opportunities appear tohave receded by 40% over the past twelve months. It is not clear if protecting the structuresalone, we can guarantee that we sustain the communities beyond the walls.

As we are reminded of the fickle value of commodities, shares and real estate it may be thatwe have an opportunity to refocus, and to consider that the real wealth of a society mayreside in its intellectual property rather than its bricks and mortar.The disparate, amorphous and eclectic resource that can be defined as artists is a difficultthing to protect. While we can identify and champion the minority group of individual artists,which have managed to emerge to the point of visibility beyond their own peer group, it is anillusion to believe that the innovation, excellence and impact encapsulated by this summit ofthe pyramid can be protected without a continual, permeable and iterative relationship to themuch more diverse foundation of cultural activity which is nurtured by the critical mass ofthinkers and makers yet to be championed.

My worry is that fear may lead us to solutions,which offer reassuringly tangible points of focus and fail to embrace the more abstract valueof critical debate, mentoring, and progression. As governments hold their breath and wait forthe economy to return to good health, we must take care to ensure that the reemergence ofconfidence is not greeted by a fragmentation of the fragile cultural networks that have beenso carefully fostered and supported over the past decade.

As institutions consider uncertain futures, potentially more modest programmes and survivalstrategies, it is important to remember that the sustainability of cultural centres is not onlyreliant on winning over the funders and philanthropists. An institution will engage a limitednumber of artists to be commissioned, promoted, and subcontracted to deliver content,however a much larger number also represent the core of an audience. They are the peer reviewers,the critical arbiters and community of an institution. Institutions that reach out toshow solidarity, respect and interest in the networks which, validate and vitalise them, maybe better placed to safeguard their relevance and justify themselves as active components of acultural landscape rather than museums of previous successes.

So how will artists survive - perhaps practice will contract as the market becomes morecautious. Perhaps a new government will even more explicitly focus on the SMEs [small and medium-sized businesses] over thediverse, pluralistic incubators of invention. Perhaps artists will develop more anarchicresponses to a state that appears to misunderstand them. Artists will continue to make work. Iam confident that artists will continue to inventively seek out new frameworks to support therealization of their work. The question is really, whether the institutions, as they struggle tosustain themselves will become disembodied from the generation that emerge through morechallenging times or whether they will work to articulate and nurture the self-funded, self subsidisedand embryonic practices, which they will rely on and benefit from in comingyears.

So, if you agree with me that artists are a core element of the critical mass, which justifiesyour work, how with limited budgets can you seek to ensure that critical dialogue ismaintained? I would propose that, while forging pragmatic links with sponsors, governmentagencies and development, a concerted effort should be made to consolidate and strengthenthe perception of institutions, not only as presenters of the achievement, but also as thefacilitators for experimentation, dialogue, research and critical debate. Institutions need towelcome artists to work with them on the strategic challenges ahead. They need to ensurethat artists feel as valued as the funders and that open critical dialogue can be embodiedthrough debate, consultation, practice and representation. Institutions need to attempt to maptheir constituencies and present

themselves as the permeable research centres, which protectand nurture emerging arguments, risk and research.

If the market for luxury commodities, which has been credited with supporting the boom inBritain's artistic practice and profile, appears to become more conservative, perhaps it is timefor institutions to take more credit for their more considered and longer term role as thechampions of the life-long enquiry, resilience and curiosity, which artists often appear toembrace. Bridging the academic enquiry of the university, the diversity and pluralism of theindividual practitioners and the public access and ownership of the museum. Perhaps theycould look to emphasise further, their role not only as protectors of cultural wealth but alsohavens for cultural potential.For me the celebration of pluralism is essential. I dont believe that all artists can help us tofind some form of truth, but more that their cacophony of diverse, contradictory, tangentialand subjective views may serve to challenge the fiction of established narratives and remindus of the inherent complexity of human perception and experience.

I was recently told an idealistic metaphor to describe and justify the role of artists. - If youimagine a crowd, perhaps a tour or commuter group hurrying forward to its destination,artists could be seen as members of a crowd who run ahead to look around a corner andreport back to the group on what they have found. The slightly heroic role of the artist asadvance recon for society was quite flattering to any of us who describe ourselves as artists. Ifound myself slightly disagreeing with the simplicity of the image.I proposed an alternate view that artists are also the members of the crowd who drop back totie their shoe-laces and find themselves distracted by the view down an alley or the detail ofan anomaly, which might not have been initially regarded as significant by the crowd.Enthralled by the beauty and significance of their observation they might attempt to rejoin thegroup to describe what they saw.

Perhaps on most occasions, the view will (and perhapsshould) be negated as trivial or too specific to the artist's idiosyncratic interests. Butperiodically a portion of the group might agree to return with the artist to share the detail thathad been previously dismissed. I suggested that the value of artists was not that all of theseviews and observations were vital to a society, but more that through allowing a wide array ofindividuals the luxury of stopping to look again and report back, ensured that if insight wasgained, there was a chance that it might be considered.

To stretch the metaphor, the museum could be considered as the owner of a soap-box, whomay choose to help a returning individual contact its peer group. Perhaps this might be byoffering an individual temporary access to the platform and microphone if it feels an insight isof value. However, for me the museum achieves its greatest value when it not only revealsthe successful insights, but when it serves as an advocate. The museum becomes dynamic,when it is also a voice in the crowd arguing vehemently for the group to tolerate theapparently errant behaviour of the individuals who periodically lag behind to stare andobserve.The challenge for artists may be to ensure that love of the soap-box does not become thedominant motivation behind their curiosity. The challenge for museums may be to continueto find the courage to offer the microphone to voices, which have not yet been heard.

David Cotterrell 16.09.09