

1 ARTS

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James Boyle
Chair
The Cultural Commission

12 NOV 2004

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Dear Mr Boyle

**The Royal Scottish Academy Galleries and The Exhibiting Societies of Scotland
Association (ESSA)**

As a passionate supporter of the arts in Scotland and as a serious private collector of contemporary Scottish works of art, I write to express my concern about the situation regarding the continued access to the RSA Galleries by the Exhibiting Societies of Scottish Artists. ESSA is a registered Scottish charity which represents the interests of the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolours (RSW), the Scottish Society of Artists (SSA) and Visual Arts Scotland (VAS), all of which are serious, long-established professional visual arts organisations and which have a strong and proven commitment to **education** through their annual exhibitions and in their own education programmes.

Some background: during the recent refurbishment of the Royal Scottish Academy Galleries and the completion of the Playfair Project, the member societies of ESSA were informed by the National Galleries of Scotland that their rental would increase from £300 per week to £3000 per week, and that the exhibiting periods for the member societies would be reduced from 15 weeks per annum to 8 weeks per annum. While the Scottish Executive is to be congratulated for its vision in helping make the Playfair Project possible, the 1000% increase in the rental cost for the member societies of ESSA and the reduced exhibiting periods are to be deplored.

The Committee of ESSA, under the redoubtable chairmanship of Dr David Colvin, CBE, has had many long discussions with the Directorate of the National Galleries and its Trustees; with the Scottish Arts Council; and with various civil servants of the Scottish Executive, but thus far there has been little or no change to the rental costs and exhibiting periods.

The Director of the National Gallery of Scotland, Mr Michael Clarke, has insisted that, in the formulation of its own exhibition plans for the refurbished galleries, there will be extreme pressure on exhibition spaces in the RSA Galleries buildings, and so cannot envisage extending the proposed annual eight week period. The Chair of the Trustees of the National Galleries, Mr Brian Ivory, has claimed that while he and the Trustees wish to have the societies back, conditions attached to the

£10 million grant from the Scottish Executive require that the Trustees charge economic rentals for the use of the Galleries.

It also appears that the **institutional infrastructure** has not been particularly effective in supporting this section of Scotland's visual arts practitioners: the Scottish Executive, by tradition and practice, takes an 'arm's length' attitude, while the Scottish Arts Council, ironically, have no grant schemes to provide finance to the member societies of ESSA to help defray rental costs, but have suggested that the member societies might wish to consider 'developing sales'. (This well-meant and 'empowering' advice of 'developing sales' blatantly ignores the important work the ESSA member societies have been doing in their annual exhibitions for the past eighty years or so since the Society of Scottish Artists was first granted the use of the RSA Galleries for exhibition purposes in 1924 and the RSW in 1925!)

What seems to emerge from the many requests from ESSA to various governmental and other statutory bodies for support is a kind of admission of 'institutional helplessness.' The combined efforts of the Trustees, the Executive and the SAC remind one of a line from Beckett, 'such helplessness to help they cannot help!' So much for **institutional infrastructure** (or **cross-institutional infrastructure**) in this particular matter. In this particular matter, no statutory body appears to wish to or intervene or help. Perhaps the Cultural Commission may be able to assist.

However, current policy regarding **access to and delivery of services** in this particular case could not be more antipathetic to contemporary Scottish art. Current policy, as it operates, appears to do nothing to support or promote contemporary Scottish art, and indeed it arguably runs counter to the provisions of the National Galleries of Scotland Act of 1906, in respect of the promotion of the Fine Arts in Scotland. And I can think of no other capital city in Europe where this kind of situation would be allowed to develop. Elsewhere, government ministers would not be allowed to ignore this kind of question, nor would their civil service advisors be so lax to suggest that ministers could dismiss or ignore such a question. Ironically, in this case, the civil servants and political advisors seem quite happy to advise our ministers that the ESSA question is not a question at all for discussion. And this matter is compounded by the position of the un-elected and largely un-representative Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland who, not democratically accountable in the least, are quite ready to banish the contemporary artist and the contemporary tradition from our Galleries, simply because contemporary Scottish art, it would appear, does not fit in with the prevailing vision of the current Director General of the National Galleries of Scotland.

The Scottish Executive some four years ago produced its National Cultural Strategy - *Creating our Future - Minding our Past*. The strategy is broad and inclusive and aims to place culture at the heart of all the Executive does. The key themes of the strategy include widening opportunities and developing and celebrating excellence.

However, the policies formulated by the unelected Trustees of the NGS and supported by the Executive and by ministers too, go in the face of this strategy. These policies not only restrict **access** by our communities of visual artists to this

prestigious venue but limit access to educational opportunities to the Scottish public. The cultural responsibilities of the Trustees of the NGS and of the SAC seem to take precedence over the cultural rights of Scottish citizens and of Scottish visual artists. Perhaps the work of the Cultural Commission can look at ways in which to redress this imbalance.

One way, of course, of redressing this imbalance would be for the Cultural Commission to recommend to the Scottish Parliament to introduce a minor piece of legislation, perhaps a Statutory Instrument, to allow the member societies of ESSA access in perpetuity to the Royal Scottish Academy Galleries for their annual shows, on the same terms currently enjoyed by the Royal Scottish Academy and its Academicians. The Academicians of the RSA currently pay no rental for use of the Galleries. Such parity would be fair and democratic and would satisfy completely the questions of the Executive's cultural responsibilities and in this particular matter the cultural rights of Scotland's professional visual artists.

Furthermore, at a time when government is more open and accountable and when decision-making is more transparent, it is no longer acceptable for unfair, unpopular and anti-democratic policies decided by un-elected and largely un-representative appointees to remain un-challenged. Perhaps it is time for the Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland to be appointed in a more transparent manner and perhaps the Cultural Commission may wish to examine this matter also in the course of its deliberations.

Finally, may I add that I hold non-professional membership, as a friend and supporter, of the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolour; the Society of Scottish Artists; and Visual Arts Scotland. I support wholeheartedly the aims of the Exhibiting Societies of Scottish Artists, whose function is to promote contemporary Scottish contemporary art at home and abroad through various educational projects, including their annual shows. While I do not and can not write on behalf of ESSA or its constituent members, I do write in a private capacity as a passionate supporter of the visual arts in Scotland. I very much hope that my concerns, which are shared by many professional visual artists in Scotland, may be taken into account by the work of your Commission and that some real and permanent solution may be found to resolve the situation that I outline in my late submission to Phase 1 of your consultation process.

With all good wishes
Yours sincerely

Michael Carter