

17 JAN 2005

MEMO

FROM: VARIE
TO: SCOTTISH CULTURAL COMMISSION
RE: CULTURAL POLICY

The enclosed text gives an overview of the rationale, intentions, and ambitions of VARIE (Visual Arts Research Institute, Edinburgh), which is located in the School of Arts, Culture, and Environment, University of Edinburgh.

VARIE's status as an umbrella organisation gives it a potent role as a stimulant to high-level collaboration, co-operation, and co-ordination in the cultural realm. Where else might a group of senior academics and artists meet the leaders of the national cultural institutions to discuss joint initiatives?

As a high-level, professional research institute, VARIE can contribute to the 'arts for all' agenda by bringing its research findings to the public in the most accessible way possible. The obvious vehicle for this is the exhibition, and it should be noted that the VARIE-promoted exhibition *Monet: The Seine and the Sea* (Royal Scottish Academy, 2003) attracted a record audience of 173,000, confirming the appetite of the broader public for the visual arts. At a more specialist level, the public conferences linked to this and other exhibitions attract international speakers and substantial audiences, all of which brings attention to Scotland as a cultural hub.

Beyond the physical borders of Scotland, VARIE's forthcoming journal project, dedicated to global art in translation, will assert the importance of cultural diversity and will challenge stereotypical notions of art practice and history. Funded by a major North American philanthropic trust and published by the University of Chicago Press, this world-class journal will confirm Scotland's presence on the international stage as a vital site of cultural transfer. This is a role that it played during the European enlightenment, when Walter Scott, for example, translated Goethe's play *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773) in one 'fevered night'. It is a role that it is eminently well equipped to play again.

While funding of the journal is already in place, it would be naive to think that good intentions alone will move Scotland's cultural sector into the first rank. Resources must also be dedicated to arts practice, research, teaching, and dissemination. VARIE urges the Scottish Cultural Commission to address the innovative and equitable funding of the arts in Scotland as the core question of its enterprise.

Contacts: Professor Iain Boyd Whyte, VARIE Director
Dr Stacy Boldrick, VARIE Administrator

COVER

VARIE

Visual Arts Research Institute Edinburgh

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For Comment & approval
13/01/2005

An Introduction to VARIE

"VARIE embraces not only a broad range of academic, curatorial, and research expertise, but also practitioners: artists, architects, and designers working across a broad spectrum of traditional and new media. With its direct links to research in digital media, informatics, virtual environments, and the physical sciences, the VARIE consortium is one of the most potent platforms for research into visuality and the visual arts to be found anywhere in the world."

Electronic Signature
Iain Boyd Whyte
Director, VARIE

Photo Iain



Iain Boyd Whyte is Professor of Architectural History at the University of Edinburgh and Director of VARIE. A former Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung and a Getty Scholar, he has published extensively on early Modernism in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands. He was co-curator of the Council of Europe exhibition Art and Power, shown in London, Barcelona and Berlin in 1996/97, and was a Trustee of the National Galleries of Scotland from 1998-2002. He was Senior Program Officer at the Getty Grant Program, Los Angeles from 2002-2005, before returning to Edinburgh to take up the directorship of VARIE.

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Visual Arts Research Institute Edinburgh

Established in 1999, VARIE is a consortium of the following partner institutions:

- The University of Edinburgh
- Edinburgh College of Art
- The National Galleries of Scotland
- The National Museums of Scotland
- The National Library of Scotland

And Associate Members

- The University of St Andrews
- The University of Glasgow

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MISSION

The Visual Arts Research Institute, Edinburgh (VARIE) extends the study of the visual beyond the traditional boundaries of art history. It stimulates, enables, and manages collaborative projects with other disciplines in the arts and sciences engaged in the creation and interpretation of images and visual information. It promotes theoretical, artist-based, and curatorial research that furthers our understanding of visual culture and visual information. The outcomes of this research are circulated to both academic and general audiences through publications, public symposia, and exhibitions. The goal is additionality – the gestation and implementation of research initiatives that could not prosper in the context of the lone researcher or the single institution.

VARIE is committed to diversity. It is the only visual art consortium in the UK to count national galleries, museums and libraries, an art college and university art history departments among its core members. From this broad base, it promotes collaborative research between institutions and individuals, between scholars, artists, curators, and scientists.

The location of VARIE within a major research university makes it possible to explore visual culture and information broadly, beyond the traditional confines of art history. Pictures are the vehicles not only of the discourses of painting and drawing, but of a broad sweep of scholarly activities. Visual forms are not simply optical patterns, but the bearers of meaning and aids to cognition. As Goethe noted in 1789 in his introduction to Propyläen: "that which we know we have first seen." Learning is based on seeing, from the first insights gained by the pre-school child to the higher mathematics of current astronomical speculation. The world of string theory and multidimensional membranes, for example, can only be made comprehensible — both to the expert and to the laity — through visual depiction.

VARIE's unique research base supports the international transfer of ideas and knowledge to a broad spectrum of audiences, stimulating interest and participation in the theory and practice of the visual arts.

FUTURE PROJECTS

While nurturing and developing its existing research interests, VARIE will launch three new initiatives from 2005.

- Extending its diversity not only across disciplines, but also across cultures, VARIE is committed to the launch of a new journal in 2006 to be entitled *Global Art in Translation* (GAIT). This journal will bring together the very best writing on visual art and culture from across the world, and publish it in English translation. Edited by VARIE, produced by the University of Chicago Press, and generously funded by a major North American philanthropic trust, GAIT will challenge the parochial and the stereotypical understanding of art by expanding our perception and knowledge of global art practice. In the process, it will place VARIE at the epicentre of the international discussion on visual art and culture.

• In collaboration with the MIT-based *Image and Meaning* initiative and with the *Hermann von Helmholtz Centre* at the Humboldt University, Berlin, VARIE will explore the status and functions of the visual image and the processes of visual communication in both the arts and sciences. Following the first *Image and Meaning* conference held at MIT in 2001, and *Image and Meaning 2* at the Getty Center in 2005 (see <http://web.mit.edu/i-m/>), it is planned to stage a third conference in Edinburgh in 2008.

[• Under the aegis of RIHA, the International Association of Research Institutes in the History of Art, VARIE will collaborate with fellow member institutions on an international colloquium, provisionally entitled *What is Art Research*]

RESOURCES

VARIE draws on rich resources, both human and material. The current core membership of the consortium comprises some 250 art and architectural historians, artists, designers, and curators. Beyond this core constituency, VARIE has direct research links across a wealth of disciplines in three leading universities, a major college of art, two national collections, and a national library.

Objects held in the collections of the VARIE partners cover a broad historical and geographical range, stretching from monumental Buddha figures and Neolithic sculpture to contemporary installations and jewellery; from medieval Islamic manuscripts to early photography, from eighteenth-century scientific instruments to the found objects of the twentieth-century Surrealists. Between these poles sit major collections of European painting, sculpture, prints, and drawings.

BACKGROUND

In its first phase, VARIE built on the existing research interests of its collaborators and concentrated in particular on symposia with linked publications. Exhibition planning and curation was a second major interest, with *Monet: The Seine and the Sea* (Royal Scottish Academy, 2003) the most notable outcome. In addition, a vibrant set of partnerships was established between the consortium members, which ranged from informal discussions to thematic seminars, collaborative internships, artist's residencies, and research studentships.

More recent projects have been designed around four thematic clusters:

The Virtual

- *Visualizing the Network: Digital Representations of Urban Infrastructure*
- *The Interactive Self-Portrait*

The City

- *The Court Culture of Early Modern Rome*
- *Redesigning the City: The Percy Johnson-Marshall Collection*
- *City and Spirit in Modernity*
- *The Anxious City*

Portraiture and Identity

- *Miniature Portraits*
- *The Naked Portrait*
- *The Interactive Self-Portrait*

Scottish Visual Culture

- *Scottish Art Research Seminar*

Beyond these four focuses, independent projects include three seminars on the future of the early modernist blockbuster exhibition, scheduled for London, Edinburgh, and Amsterdam; a series of exchange visits between Scottish and French-based art historians, artists, curators, and postgraduate students; and a curatorship at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, dedicated to the Eduardo Paolozzi collection.

PAST EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

- *The King's Head: The Execution of Charles I* (1999)
- *Body and Soul: Exploring Objects – Making Myths* (2000, 26th Annual Conference of the Association of Art Historians)
- *Britannia, Italia and Germania: Taste and Travel in 19th Century Europe** (2000)
- *The End of Outsider Art?* (2000)
- *Shahnama: Visual Language of the Persian Book of Kings** (2001)
- *The Stuart Court in Exile** (2001)
- *Soil and Stone: Impressionism/Urbanism/Environment** (2001)
- *The Miniature Portrait: New Approaches** (2002)
- *Monet and French Landscape Painting* (2003)

* *Published by Ashgate in the VARIE Occasional Papers Series*

For a full list of past projects, see the VARIE website
(<http://www.arts.ed.ac.uk/varie/index.html>).

FUNDING AND COLLABORATION OPPORTUNITIES

VARIE is project-driven, and committed to securing institutional and financial support for innovative, interdisciplinary research.

Funding bodies to date [add logos]:

Arts and Humanities Research Board
Bonhams
British Academy
City of Edinburgh Council
Drambuie
Entente Cordiale Scotland, Scottish Executive
Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
Leverhulme Trust
Phillips

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