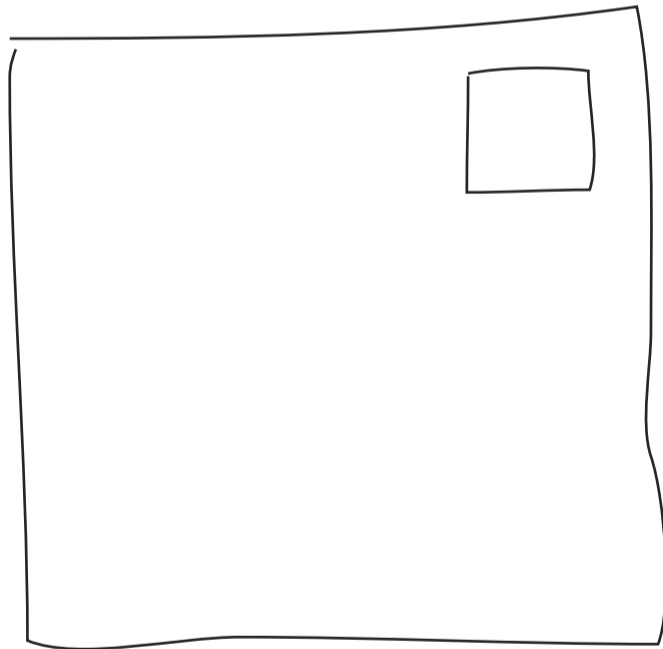


# The Metropolitan Complex

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Permaculture at Project, Dublin,  
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## Roundtable Discussion

**Alan Phelan, Annie Fletcher, Brian Hand, Finola Jones, Mark Garry, Grant Watson, Vaari Claffey and Sarah Pierce**

On Saturday 25 January 2003, the following conversation took place in Sarah Pierce's studio in Broadstone, Dublin. The participants are artists, curators or both. They have all curated in Dublin, independently or within an institution. Pierce invited them to have an informal discussion. There was no audience present.

**Sarah Pierce** Most of the art we see in Dublin can be grouped into exhibitions in public spaces, exhibitions in museums, and exhibitions in commercial galleries. There are sometimes occasions where shows occur outside these organisations. How do these contexts work together?

**Brian Hand** When I lived in Scotland I was amazed by the small number of commercial galleries. In terms of contemporary art there were none. Then the Modern Institute opened up a small space representing four or five people in Glasgow. I had an expectation that Glasgow, being a big city would have lots of galleries. In fact, Dublin has more. It's pretty amazing that with the success of Scottish artists they had no gallery representation in Glasgow.

**Annie Fletcher** Where were artists showing in Glasgow at that moment?

**Brian Hand** They showed in all the public spaces, like CCA, or The Third Eye which it was called then, and Transmission.

**Finola Jones** Did artists have gallery representation elsewhere?

**Brian Hand** Some of them did, around Europe or in London. Douglas Gordon would have studied in London and that made a difference. A lot of other artists who didn't move out of Scotland still found representation outside of Glasgow.

**Annie Fletcher** They got very savvy about learning how to represent themselves. Much of the energy and discourse that was going on in Glasgow was because there weren't very many spaces. Artists were doing it themselves. It's a romantic notion, but on the other hand they brought a new kind of professionalism to being an artist. The Modern Institute is an example. They are at the art fairs throwing huge parties. I was talking about this with Nathan Coley. These artists knew their worth and they knew they had to start marketing in a totally different way. It came through in their super-chic, super-smart thinking about contemporary fashionability.

**Alan Phelan** Still, a market didn't exist for their work in Glasgow. They were selling elsewhere. In a similar way, contemporary artists in Dublin have a tiny market here for their work, if any at all. It's almost as if there are no commercial galleries for the number of works that are actually sold.

**Vaari Claffey** *Multiples*<sup>1</sup> sold so little here. We would send brochures over to England and the work would sell better at the ICA than at Temple Bar Gallery. Obviously the ICA is the ICA, but they would sell better there because the market here is so limited.

**Brian Hand** The investment of public money in Scotland has been strong and I think that is also true in Ireland.

I mean specifically the investment of public money in artists. Success is almost always measured in private money, but public funds are creating the platform for this success. Successful public policy in supporting the arts has happened without private galleries.

**Grant Watson** There is a kind of reciprocal relationship between public spaces and commercial galleries. Public spaces can't provide a facility for artists to sell work so private galleries fulfil that function. And galleries are keen to have their artists show in public spaces.

**Brian Hand** Which one leads the way?

**Grant Watson** It depends where you are and at what time. In London now private galleries dominate, but that wouldn't have been the case 20 years ago.

**Annie Fletcher** I would never say galleries dominate intellectually, or even conceptually, in terms of ideas. If curating is idea-making, I would never say galleries lead the way.

**Grant Watson** Of course, but in terms of the kinds of career choices that artists make and the kind of work artists make, commercial galleries have become orientated towards these choices. So for example, artists coming out of art colleges in London have an idea of being represented by a certain gallery, in part so that they can make a certain kind of work. It's very hard to be represented in Dublin. I mean we're really talking about the Kerlin Gallery and Green on Red. That doesn't reflect the level of activity here.

**Sarah Pierce** Overall, the commercial gallery scene in Dublin has little influence on the choices artists make. In order to have a career here artists really have to use public spaces in a clever way. There are only so many times you can show at Temple Bar Gallery before you have to think about where to go from there.

**Alan Phelan** To the Kerlin, like Phil Collins.

**Sarah Pierce** If we understand public spaces as places where artists can experiment, does the way we run these spaces curb this? As they become more institutionalised, what is lost?

**Grant Watson** In terms of what?

**Sarah Pierce** Most of the exchanges around a show are limited by the organisation's calendar, its hours, etc. For instance, artists are told the dates for their show, when the opening will be, how long the run is, the public hours.

**Grant Watson** They are not as free as perhaps they could be.

**Sarah Pierce** Public spaces often define themselves as alternatives to the commercial gallery and the museum. Yet in Dublin these spaces seem to model the behaviour of commercial galleries rather than deciding what is professional based on their own experience, or based on a certain commitment to emerging artists or experimentation.

**Annie Fletcher** Glasgow is a good comparison. Transmission is showing people like Pipolotti Rist. These spaces are now major players in terms of the shows they do. Maybe they are still alternative, I don't know, but they include this other league of names too.

**Sarah Pierce** Where do young artists show in Dublin?

**Mark Garry** Every year you get a group of graduates who put on a show in a space not usually used for art. There

is an endless interest in making these shows happen, but most groups do one project and then leave it there. They sense a chasm exists between the types of shows they want to do and the spaces available to them in Dublin.

**Sarah Pierce** Do they leave Dublin?

**Mark Garry** A lot of students come to a point of saying, 'I'm not going to make it here, I have to go away to London, or New York or L.A.' They have all these great ideas, but for them to happen they have to go out of the country. It's a pity. These are young artists with a lot of energy and interest in Dublin, but who just can't make it here.

**Grant Watson** I think there is a lack of medium level space in Dublin. There are quite established spaces that show artists who are established.

**Mark Garry** Exactly. There isn't a lot of room in Dublin to experiment and fail.

**Annie Fletcher** Which is really important. Brian's point about public investment in the arts is also important. I was just working with the Arts Council on a grant panel. They have changed their system with project based money so that artists and independent curators can apply. It frees up the strangle hold of public money going into established institutions like the Douglas Hyde or Temple Bar Gallery. It means that shows can happen in other places and that potentially opens up what artists can do.

**Alan Phelan** Although that potential diminishes with budget cuts and the debt the Arts Council is in. They are sitting on grant decisions which makes it impossible to plan ambitious independent projects. There is a huge backlog.

**Finola Jones** They are taking 8-10 months to inform artists of their decisions.

**Alan Phelan** The principle is great, but the finances are falling apart.

**Sarah Pierce** Are there any publicly supported alternative spaces in Dublin? Places with staff and a physical location that are more open than some of the places we have mentioned?

**Vaari Claffey** Historically, Temple Bar Gallery and Project were those spaces. Then the climate changed around us and so did the expectations that artists had from us in terms of professionalising and the kinds of shows that we put on.

**Sarah Pierce** So for a generation of artists, Project and Temple Bar Gallery were useful spaces to show right out of college. City Arts Centre<sup>2</sup> too, where artists like Paddy Jolley and Gerard Byrne had their first shows. How else did the climate change?

**Vaari Claffey** A lot of what we're talking about has to do with what has happened in Dublin in terms of property. There were spaces in Dublin ten years ago where people could just open a gallery for two weeks, have a really exciting show and then close down and do something else. That kind of movement completely stopped as soon as Temple Bar became embroiled with leases and licenses. Suddenly there were none of these spaces.

**Sarah Pierce** A certain type of activity vanished. At Arthouse<sup>3</sup> I was an artist running an institution and I thought, 'Yes! I can keep this really open for artists.' Then I realised everyone wanted a 4-6 week show, the opening night, the invitation. It was

like there was no other way to work together. Few artists were interested in pushing the limits of what constitutes an exhibition.

**Annie Fletcher** Well, they don't have to do they?

**Sarah Pierce** No. I think Vaari is right though, certain expectations accompany showing in an institution. The Dublin Fringe Festival has done a good job of offering experimental exhibitions in the visual arts.

**Mark Garry** There is an issue of validity with shows that take place outside institutions. If a young artist brings their CV to Sarah or Vaari with all these shows on it that no one remembers taking place, what role did they have? You could tack a piece of paper to your wall and say, 'Hey I had an exhibition.' The public memory of an event, whether it is in the press or other places makes a show valid.

**Sarah Pierce** Often institutions themselves perpetuate the memory of an event. So what happens to events that take place independently? Do alternative projects risk being forgotten?

**Annie Fletcher** There is a debate about that. Do big exhibitions make art history and the small ones get left out?

**Sarah Pierce** Did people see the project that took place last spring on Captain's Road? A project like that originates, it receives public money and press attention, and it relates to a larger context of what is taking place in Dublin. Then what happens?

**Brian Hand** It is part of a memory. Most of our time is spent remembering things we have experienced or seen. If you participate or if it is important to you, or different to you, you will remember. Captain's Road is a good example of a project that was fraught with local history, that is why it appeared. But even people who didn't know that history got a sense of something happening outside an institution. For students these models are important.

**Mark Garry** There is a group called VIA who may continue for a few years, who did a show in a storefront on Camden Street. They have a clear sense of professional practice, how to get people interested and to get the press involved.

**Grant Watson** Shows like that are great, but they are also ephemeral, which is part of their character. In a way, it would be good to have a space that was permanently there, where people knew they could see a certain kind of work and a certain kind of experimentation.

**Sarah Pierce** With flexibility in terms of staff, calendars, structure...

**Grant Watson** Yes. Is that what this space will be?

**Sarah Pierce** Well, this is my studio, and my office, and where I work. I'm using it for The Metropolitan Complex, and that opens it up to different ideas of what an artist's studio might include. Like this roundtable discussion, and projects that involve other artists, and moments where I invite the public in.

**Finola Jones** Project has recently done some exhibitions that employ informality as a conscious strategy. This hasn't been seen a lot in Dublin.

**Sarah Pierce** Can you describe what you mean by informality?

**Finola Jones** Particularly in the layout of the shows. The structure is quite loose. I feel the work is considered in

its placement, but it's not necessarily about formal arrangements. It is not overworked. There are associations, or conversations between works that take place as you walk through the space.

**Alan Phelan** What about Pallas Studios? They are opening a gallery on Buckingham Street. I'm not sure if it is showing the same people who are in the studios, or if it has a more generous remit.

**Mark Garry** They have three spaces now. The first show is all London-based artists.

**Sarah Pierce** Pallas is an good example of artists sharing studio space, curating exhibitions, and making contact with artists outside of Dublin, all within a peer group. In some ways studio collectives in Dublin, like Broadstone and Pallas, are forging ground as alternative spaces for artists. This is quite progressive, hard work.

**Brian Hand** I heard a story about an artist who had the adjoining studio to Pallas who was outbid by the Pallas artists. In other words, her rent was increased and she couldn't pay so she left the space. That doesn't show a lot of solidarity between artists.

**Vaari Claffey** I think there is more now than there has been.

**Alan Phelan** Pallas is an institution. It gets grants from the Arts Council. They are recognised and pretty well funded. They are not a bunch of random people hanging out in a warehouse. They go to art fairs, for whatever it is worth or however successful it is.

**Annie Fletcher** It's a difficult question, how do you keep that kind of artist-run space open and active, and make sure it has a supportive administration without institutionalising its activity?

**Sarah Pierce** It's tricky. This leads to the topic of artists curating. Often artists organise shows to get their work and their peer's work seen.

**Mark Garry** That was my initial motivation, absolutely. To get my friends' work shown.

**Finola Jones** Do you think artists should curate themselves into their own shows?

**Annie Fletcher** I don't have a problem with it. If you are straightforward about what you are doing and literally just want a platform for all of your work to be shown together. How do you feel about it?

**Finola Jones** I wouldn't feel good about it at all. I think if you are an artist curating a show you are trying to extend something beyond your own practice, and that's what you should be doing. The show might relate to your work, but I don't think it should be a platform for it.

**Mark Garry** I put my own work in the second show I curated, and as soon as it went up and was in the press, I wished I hadn't done it. It was a dumb move.

**Grant Watson** Artist-curated shows are often curated by three or four people. I think the fact that they might all put their own work in reflects an important part of what they want to portray, which is that they are all part of a scene that is making work together, relating to each other. These shows are often the most interesting, and the least contrived.

**Sarah Pierce** Are they self-promotion?

**Grant Watson** Sure. Which is good. It is healthy.

**Annie Fletcher** The motivation to get work out there and to have work that is in dialogue with your peers physically is really crucial. It doesn't happen enough. I agree that it is problematic but it is absolutely better than it not happening at all. It is also about reclaiming power, curatorial power.

**Alan Phelan** There was a Los Angeles-based group of artists called Project X, which was about non-curating. It was a group of friends who thought of a theme and everybody made new work around that theme. When I was in New York I met someone who had been involved and so we imported that structure to Rochester. I invited Irish artists and he invited L.A. artists. We planned the whole project around shopping malls and art centres, we picked artists and they made work to respond to a theme. We made work also. But because we were dealing with distant populations of artists, it ended up being more like a regular curated show, despite all this intention.

**Sarah Pierce** Curated because of how it was selected?

**Alan Phelan** Structurally it didn't end up being any different from any other show. In the end it was totally curated, even though we kept telling ourselves it wasn't.

**Annie Fletcher** I want to go back to the idea of artists putting themselves in their own shows. It implies there is a fixed idea about what curating is, to think that it compromises curating to put yourself in a show. There are loads of different ways of curating. One relates to what Finola is saying about trying to extend a thinking practice, and maybe another is trying to literally expose a network, to diffuse ideas and get stuff out there. To limit how curating can work is problematic.

**Brian Hand** Curating can be self-promotion anyway. You don't have to put your work in a show to promote yourself as a very powerful figure. The powerful person who comes to an exhibition is not the artist. The powerful person is the person from the Arts Council, the person from the funding body, the person who is the curator or director of the international space. If that one person comes in at five minutes to five and you are about to turn off the installation, you won't turn it off. Because they come from Palais de Tokyo and they are the person you want to see.

**Grant Watson** I'm not sure about that statement. People have different levels of power at different points in their career whether they are artists or curators, or working for the Arts Council.

**Brian Hand** What I mean is that people identify powerful people and those people are rarely artists. I don't care how big the artist is, I have never seen an artist treated in the same way as a director of an institution.

**Grant Watson** I have. I've seen really big artists being followed by directors of institutions almost like humble servants. They rely on those big artists to come and show in their spaces. In that situation the artist has a lot of power.

**Sarah Pierce** Brian what kind of power you are talking about?

**Brian Hand** This is a debate now happening in film. Producers have started to call themselves creative-producers. These aren't people who have any input visually, they just think about what money there is going to be and where it is going to come from. When artists

are asked by institutions to curate it fulfils a kind of self-expression that fits into the institution's agenda.

**Sarah Pierce** How do theme shows fulfil the agendas of curators and institutions?

**Annie Fletcher** Again, it is just one way of doing things. As a curator it interests me creatively to see what emerges when different artists come together. I see that as part to my job.

**Brian Hand** Absolutely. It should be.

**Annie Fletcher** Solo projects are different. I just worked on solo projects with Apolonija Sustersic and Gerry Byrne. Those were both about trying to realise expansively one person's ideas.

**Grant Watson** Thematic shows can come out of a recognition of what is happening in people's work, themes that emerge out of people's practice. As a curator you go with an open mind to see artists on studio visits, and you see concepts emerge across work or through conversations that develop. It is when curators have very specific agendas and go fishing that is problematic. I think lots of curators try to find a device they can use to help structure a show. Like *Greyscale/CMYK*, or the 24 Hour show. It is not really a theme, it is a device.

**Brian Hand** The worst theme in my opinion is nationality.

**Sarah Pierce** How does 'nationality' affect the choices curators make in Dublin?

**Annie Fletcher** It's a boring way of curating.

**Finola Jones** To think that what joins artists is the fact that they are Irish.

**Alan Phelan** Irish art shows usually don't deal with nationality at all. They say nothing about a nation or nationhood or national culture that's at all useful.

**Brian Hand** 'Irish' is the term used to describe the show, and all the artists are Irish.

**Finola Jones** Brian are you talking mainly about shows that are selected from elsewhere, people come here and want an exhibition of Irish art?

**Brian Hand** Irish art shows here and abroad.

**Finola Jones** That supposedly represent us?

**Brian Hand** Take shows that happen in Dublin. You don't see a lot of shows here based on other nationalities.

**Annie Fletcher** When I was curating *How Things Turn Out* at IMMA, they had slotted it in for young Irish-based work. I was so determined not to call it anything Irish, to really just try to say, 'Hey look, this is a selection of what is going on.'

**Grant Watson** I don't have an across the board problem with Irish art shows. There is a case for promoting particular art scenes based around nationality. Going back to Glasgow, there was a very strong sense of that scene promoting Scottish artists.

**Alan Phelan** Often nationality based shows focus on a specific generation. The show that was in Helsinki last summer included a particular generation of artists, which made a pretty predictable list.

**Vaari Claffey** So much funding is around nationality. That is something that should change.

**Sarah Pierce** Do shows about nationality obscure what is really happening locally or internationally in relation to Ireland? Do they include people who are Irish, but whose work has no dialogue with anything happening in Ireland? Do they exclude people working here who might be very involved, but who may not be Irish?

**Grant Watson** *Permaculture* attempts that inclusion with artists who have come through Dublin to show here or on a residency or who are Irish and living in other places.

**Finola Jones** There are also a lot of people it doesn't include.

**Grant Watson** Every show has that doesn't it?

**Finola Jones** Yes, but how do you make those selections? How do you arrive at who to ask and who not to ask?

**Grant Watson** It comes down to work I'm interested in basically. There are also works that I am interested in that aren't in the show because of practical reasons, or because they don't fit into the show's structure.

**Vaari Claffey** And also *Permaculture* has a theme.

**Sarah Pierce** What is the theme of *Permaculture*? Is it this idea of people who have lived in or worked in Dublin?

**Grant Watson** It's less a theme really and more a beginning point or structure for the show that became one criteria for choosing.

**Vaari Claffey** There are things that won't work within its structure.

**Mark Garry** Do you think we have a responsibility to young artists graduating, or Dublin-based artists in terms of the work we choose to bring over here?

**Grant Watson** Yes I think so. In talking about the responsibility of a space to Irish artists, this can include bringing other practices to Dublin, so people have a first hand experience of that work.

**Mark Garry** But you don't want to just show everything that goes through Europe either.

**Finola Jones** Right. Like dipping out of the same pool. Everyone goes to Documenta and Manifesta and that influences what people bring to Dublin. So that what is shown there dictates what is seen here.

**Sarah Pierce** Mark's point leads to notions of audience. Are some shows geared to smaller, specific or specialised audiences, like artists?

**Annie Fletcher** I did a series in Holland recently where we invited different people to come and talk. One discussion involved Barbara Vanderlinden, from Roomade. She describes Roomade as a 'middle ground' organisation. It's a project based space that sometimes will do things with closed audiences. I think that here today we are an audience, a very specific one. There are huge and small audiences at all levels of specialisation. It's up to us to argue the value of different kinds of audiences to policy makers.

**Sarah Pierce** There is more to 'audience' than counting the number of people who enter a space over a given month.

**Annie Fletcher** Barbara drew a diagram which made me laugh because it is really true. [AF draws a large square with a small square inside the upper corner.] The large square is the curator's

work and the small square is the exhibition. There is so much that surrounds an exhibition and this can include different audiences as well. I mean it is important to know these things and not take audience for granted. Some people think big numbers mean it was a really important event, when maybe nothing much took place. That is vital to understand.

**Sarah Pierce** It is as though a small, attached, personal audience is not a valid public. Take peer groups as an example. Often peers form the most active, critically engaged and invested audiences for each other's work.

**Annie Fletcher** I think that is a point to fight for. But I also think we can do more to get diverse audiences. I mean we are in the diffusion business, of getting ideas out there. Working with Apolonija in Carlow, we hired a really smart PR woman. It made me realise how naive it is not to have proper PR. It increased our audience and that increased the depth of where the project went.

**Grant Watson** Having good PR is reliant on having good press.

**Annie Fletcher** There are ways to hijack the press to promote your point. Like writing a press release in a really smart way. They are usually so lazy they just reproduce it anyway.

**Mark Garry** It's awful that it comes down to that, but it does. The way contemporary journalists work they are given a set of press releases that say 'This show is about this' and then the journalist writes, 'Yes it is,' or 'No it is not.'

**Alan Phelan** That is shockingly true, and it is a huge issue.

**Annie Fletcher** I know, but when we saw 400 people come down to Carlow for Fumio Nanjo, that was a fantastic response.

**Grant Watson** The idea of PR goes back to Annie's box with the square in it. So much work goes into an exhibition. It's like fighting on all fronts. With *Woof Woof* we made a really big press effort through press releases and the radio, and advertising in magazines that aren't art related.

**Finola Jones** It was one of the end of year highlights in the Irish Times.

**Annie Fletcher** What I learned from doing Apolonija's show is that I really didn't consider how fantastic it can be to increase audiences, how actively it informs the work. This makes press a priority, and professional PR needs to be put in the budget from the beginning.

**Grant Watson** That is the kind of thing the Arts Council would really approve of. They are very keen on publicising things.

**Mark Garry** When I started doing totally off-site shows that had an audience for one night, it was so important for people to know and to come. I started to do total PR moves, like inviting Victoria White and Aidan Dunne to my house. I really media-whored it. I got a 3/4 page write-up in the Times three days before the event.

**Sarah Pierce** Did anyone write about the show after it took place?

**Mark Garry** No, there wasn't anything written after the event.

**Sarah Pierce** That is important. In terms of Annie's idea of diffusion the press can promote a show and perhaps increase audiences. But rarely do shows in Dublin evolve into criti-

cal discussions in the press after the initial calendar release. The press misses a lot of activity. There are more involved and insightful ways to reflect public experience than a list of highlights.

**Brian Hand** Artists don't write for newspapers and that is one problem.

**Sarah Pierce** Do you think they should?

**Brian Hand** Yes.

**Mark Garry** I do too.

**Finola Jones** They used to, much more consistently.

**Alan Phelan** Aidan Dunne is an artist.

**Grant Watson** I think there is a high level of discussion about work that occurs in Dublin, but it is not reflected in the press, it's not written down.

**Mark Garry** Does a critical discourse about art take place in the press in other countries?

**Alan Phelan** It depends on who you talk to.

**Annie Fletcher** In Holland it is crap.

**Alan Phelan** It looks great from here!

**Brian Hand** A lot of discussion in France takes place using talk radio. Really serious intellectuals will discuss what is happening with contemporary art.

**Grant Watson** People in London complain constantly about the level of criticism.

**Annie Fletcher** Ireland is pretty good comparatively.

**Alan Phelan** Again it depends on who you talk to.

**Annie Fletcher** In Belfast about two years ago, Eoghan McTigue and Richard West, who is one of the editors of Source Magazine, did a huge survey of the press, partly because they were so frustrated by either how bitchy or how appalling the analysis was that was taking place in the papers. They decided to send out a survey to every cultural organisation in Northern Ireland and ask them what they thought of the coverage in the press. Then they started writing letters to the papers. It makes me wonder if we should develop a strategy to find out how organisations and artists here feel. A person I know working in a space in Dublin said that they don't bother with the View on RTE anymore because there really isn't any point to the analysis.

**Sarah Pierce** Considering John Kelly starts each visual arts segment saying, 'I have to admit I didn't have a clue what was going on here...'

**Vaari Claffey** 'I didn't know what was going on did you?' 'No.' 'Did you?' 'No.' Okay onto the book...

**Sarah Pierce** The night Willie Doherty's work was reviewed one of the panellists was talking about *Blind Spot*, a video, and he mentioned he hadn't seen the whole piece. That was somehow acceptable, as though forty seconds with a work of art is enough involvement. How does this help the public understand an exhibition? It can take weeks to read a book. If anyone said, 'Well, I read the first page...'

**Finola Jones** It goes back to the newspaper article where in half a page five exhibitions are reviewed, using a small paragraph on each exhibition. Often an artist has spent two years preparing for a show and there is no reflection of this involvement.

**Vaari Claffey** The same happens with theatre though. There is a huge commitment of time that goes into some productions.

**Brian Hand** Yes but theatre people are paid once rehearsals start.

**Sarah Pierce** They are in unions.

**Brian Hand** But we skirting around the issue. Why are people making art? That question is fundamental. Why does somebody bother to do this? You don't make money being an artist, unless something very rare happens to you. You end up slightly nutty as you get older. You put up with pretty bad treatment. Electricians and carpenters working on the show get better paid than you do. So given this value system it is quite remarkable that people do this as an occupation. The answer as to 'why' can often be a staring point for audiences. Why would someone choose to be an artist? A lot of people are afraid of art principally because they don't understand the activity involved. They have all these expectations about what art is that includes genius and talent and innate ability.

**Alan Phelan** And aesthetics.

**Hand** Right. What's pretty, what's not pretty.

**Sarah Pierce** In Ann Lislegaard's show, a man came up to her at the opening and accused her of trying to get away with something because her work is so simple. It made him wildly angry. 'Anyone could do that!' he yelled. Ann handled it so well. She said to the man, 'Yes. It's not complicated.' It threw him. I think he expected her to defend the art and to defend herself as the artist.

**Annie Fletcher** Often people promote a mystique around art and the artist. It is only art. It is only as good and as important as everything else, but no more so. Again, we need to communicate that.

**Alan Phelan** I had a conversation in a pub in Blackrock where I was attacked by a friend of a friend who makes lots of money, has nice cars, and who just could not understand what I was doing. I said I am doing it because I like it, I believe in it, and I believe in its meaning to other people. And he would say, 'Sorry could you explain that again?'

**Finola Jones** Why is being an artist a profession that is always questioned? At the dinner party everyone turns to you. Or your family says, 'You are such a good cook. Why don't you open a restaurant?'

**Brian Hand** Because the artist doesn't fulfil a typical career pattern. Your family might ask 'What is Finola up to this week? Oh, she's curating some show, or she's teaching...' They don't really know what you do.

**Mark Garry** It's true. It comes back to being poor. Some people consider that a glamorous thing.

**Vaari Claffey** People want artists to be tortured geniuses.

**Mark Garry** And while an artist might accept they are going to be poor, they are really hoping they will be rich and successful.

**Finola Jones** But boy are we educated.

**Sarah Pierce** I think one problem is that people understand exhibitions as the end product of an artist's labour, because that's how they are presented. Exhibitions are just one of many activities that artists do. So much work goes unaccounted for.

**Annie Fletcher** There are artists who do lectures as part of their work.

**Sarah Pierce** Grant, what do you think about the talks and lectures that have accompanied of some of your exhibitions?

**Grant Watson** I think these exchanges need to be artist led. Otherwise it can all become a bit contrived. You have curators who run spaces and they set a whole agenda up quite carefully. There shouldn't be a kind of recipe for a contemporary space.

**Annie Fletcher** Spaces should be willing to respond to ideas that might not include an exhibition. Perhaps all you want to do is organise a discussion, or even close down the exhibition space in order to put energy into different forms of discourse beyond just showing work. It depends on what kind of artist you are and what interests you. It also good when shows are on for longer.

**Sarah Pierce** I agree. Interesting things happen when we rethink the formula for an exhibition. The Dia Centre's mission, 'One artist, one work, one year' is an example. When James Coleman's show was on I returned about eight times.

**Grant Watson** Exactly, it is a different kind of viewing. The Royal Institute will have shows for 6 months, 9 months, a year.

**Alan Phelan** In Limerick City Gallery shows extend for several months. It used to be quite a frantic changeover and Mike Fitzpatrick phased that into longer runs, which if anything means more people get out to see the show.

**Vaari Claffey** At Temple Bar Gallery I would mix things up so that some projects were like a one night event and some were on for six weeks.

**Annie Fletcher** I really enjoyed what you did with Katie Holten and Susan Philipz, where they organised an event as part of their show.

**Vaari Claffey** Yes, they would place what they do in a particular context and then bring a specific audience in to be there. As an organisation it is about juggling things around, trying new things, changing the formats around talks, so that things don't become so predictable. This usually comes out of just having a conversation with the artist.

**Sarah Pierce** How do collaborations between artists and curators influence exhibitions?

**Grant Watson** I am definitely into collaborating with artists. If I meet with someone and they say to me 'My show is going to be this sculpture and these three paintings,' my reaction is, 'Wait, I am not involved in this at all.' It needs to be a process. Curating has to be involved in how a show comes together.

**Alan Phelan** Does an artist ever get completely pissed off and say 'No, this is what I want and that is what you are getting?'

**Grant Watson** It varies. Some artists are quite determined that their vision will predominate, and sometimes that's what happens.

**Finola Jones** Do you step in and offer advice on the work and how to complete the work?

**Grant Watson** Sure. Some artists want somebody to select work and maybe even help finish work. For example with Goshka Macuga and Declan Clark all three of us worked very much together. It was very intensely collaborative.

**Sarah Pierce** In the press release for that show it names the two artists in collaboration with Project's curator. Why weren't you all named as artists?

**Grant Watson** We worked together on the card, the press release, the text, and then we started building in the gallery and it was a fluid situation. My role changed slightly. I'm not prescriptive about these roles. In every relationship with an artist we've got to try and work out what we've got to do with each other.

**Finola Jones** So what is the curator's ideal artist?

**Grant Watson** There isn't one ideal.

**Brian Hand** A dead one.

**Grant Watson** That's not true.

**Vaari Claffey** That is absolutely untrue.

**Grant Watson** With a dead one you would just go and select work. There would be no engagement or collaboration at all.

**Alan Phelan** Unless there is a widow.

**Brian Hand** Did anyone see the film *Bob Flanagan Super Masochist*. He was a West Coast performance artist, American, into S & M, and he had Cystic Fibrosis. When he was dying the galleries really opened up. His show at the New Museum was one of the most cynical exercises. To see work flying out the door into collector's hands just because he had days to live.

**Alan Phelan** Wasn't he in the gallery dying?

**Brian Hand** Yes, he was there doing all the needles in the space.

**Annie Fletcher** I just went to see Eva Hesse at the Tate Modern. It was so formal and so deeply chronological and rigid. It was the opposite of every decision you could imagine Eva Hesse would make if she were alive and working with the curators.

**Grant Watson** The work is deteriorating so there was a strong case for roping everything off and putting it on plinths. That destroyed it really.

**Annie Fletcher** I think so. Hesse was so playful, her studio was chaotic and everything was jumping around mixing with each other. I was disappointed to see that happen at the Tate Modern. In some ways Brian is right, the trade on Eva Hesse in terms of the press for the show was her death, her young age, how she died.

**Brian Hand** In the economic market the artist dies and then there is a fixed number of works. The investor knows exactly what they are getting and can put it to work.

**Grant Watson** A lot of curators don't get involved in the value of work. I am not invested in the price of individual art works that get shown in the gallery. If you show work in a public space it can potentially increase the value. I'm not sure Project has that particular effect on artworks, but certainly museums do. Nevertheless as a curator, I'm not involved in how much a particular artist's work goes for. I would be if I was working in a commercial gallery.

**Brian Hand** If you were going to do a show with somebody and their work was very expensive, you'd understand that.

**Grant Watson** As a practical thing, around insurance, etc.

**Sarah Pierce** At a show at Temple Bar Gallery I was interested to see red dots

on the wall next to work that sold. It made me wonder about what public spaces perceive to be professional practice when it comes to selling work.

**Vaari Claffey** At Temple Bar Gallery there is a tradition that started with the studios where artists could put their work in the front room to sell and possibly make a salary for the year. So it is less that I promote it and more that I allow it, because it is part of Temple Bar Gallery's history.

**Annie Fletcher** Do you take a cut?

**Vaari Claffey** Yes, 25%. Our commission is less than if the work sold in a commercial gallery where they take 50%.

**Brian Hand** Why do you only take 25%?

**Annie Fletcher** Because they are state funded I suppose.

**Brian Hand** There aren't any rules as to how much you can take. If you are state funded, the more income you can raise yourself, the less funding you need. You are not showing an entrepreneurial spirit.

**Grant Watson** Basically, the primary function of a public space isn't to sell work and so I think that if you have a high commission it sets the wrong precedent. You do invest money and energy, so taking 25% because a work sold as a result of a show in your space is reasonable.

**Sarah Pierce** I'm not sure public art spaces should have an entrepreneurial spirit. Good, organised nonprofit business has different priorities. There is a reason why public spaces don't promote work for sale, which involves supporting messages or moments that don't function in the market and that might not take place otherwise.

**Annie Fletcher** For me, working in a commercial space would not be comfortable, just because of how I work with artists. To have to think about saleability would be horrendous.

**Brian Hand** But in fairness artists want to sell their work.

**Annie Fletcher** Right, but if an artist told me that was their primary concern, we probably wouldn't be working together. Brian, do you see the role of the curator as someone to sell your work?

**Brian Hand** Yes, I do. A lot of people in the art world don't talk about money because it is impolite. It is interesting the curators here are saying 'Hmm, I feel a bit awkward about the money bit.' There is a culture that dominates in the art world that believes that if you did it for the money you aren't serious.

**Alan Phelan** Like Graham Knuttel. He has quite a market for his paintings but in general artists don't take his work that seriously.

**Mark Garry** Artists, like musicians would be lying if they said that if a big deal came along they wouldn't take it. There is a fear of selling out.

**Annie Fletcher** I have just started reading a book by a Dutch economist Hans Abbing called, 'Why Are Artists Poor?' It examines from an economic point of view how the art economy functions. One point it raises is that state subsidies might actually perpetuate artists' poor economic situation.

**Grant Watson** In Holland that is a very critical question isn't it? Artists there are so heavily state-funded and the art scene is so dominated by the pulse that money brings.

**Sarah Pierce** Does this money help artists make work outside the art mar-

ket?

**Annie Fletcher** Nothing is outside the market. Yoko Ono's mail art is now in the museum framed.

**Sarah Pierce** I know, even experimental works are eventually subsumed. But I'm not talking about Yoko Ono. Is it important to ensure that work that maybe won't ever sell is still made and seen?

**Grant Watson** Yes. It is important to have funding and spaces where the priority is developing art, whether that art will sell or not. But that is not to say that those spaces are not connected to an economic system.

**Sarah Pierce** Often people wonder why art is so expensive. So much of what drives a piece of work up in value is invisible.

**Brian Hand** I could make that video so why is it €10,000...

**Alan Phelan** I was talking to an artist, Nina Elliot, who was part of the Dublin Fringe Festival. She was charging €4 for these very intricate boxes she makes that are dispensed through a vending machine. People were saying it was too expensive. That she was charging too much.

**Mark Garry** It's funny considering how inexpensive they are compared to other artworks.

**Brian Hand** The bottom line is that selling work is important to artists and it is not talked about.

**Sarah Pierce** Being compensated for time and labour is more important to some artists than selling work.

**Brian Hand** True. Some artists make work that is not so easily consumable, people heavily involved in institutional critique or in exposing the limits of these economic systems that we've been speaking about. Louise Lawler made Leo Castelli gift vouchers. It is a strategy. I just think it is quite interesting that people around the table here who do sell work are not that interested in the selling of work.

**Annie Fletcher** Brian, do you mean selling work by promoting it or through the act of curating? I've never sold a piece of work in my life.

**Grant Watson** I sold a couple of drawings.

**Vaari Claffey** Annie, you have sold work. People bought work through the *Multiples* that you curated.

**Alan Phelan** In Australia artists pay the gallery to have an exhibition.

**Vaari Claffey** It is all strange. Around *Multiples* we aren't supposed to actually try to promote work for sale because of our funding, although it is perfectly acceptable for the Gallery Director to sell work from a show to another institution, as though that is a cleaner transaction.

**Brian Hand** The notion of somebody selling your work is important and it's not talked about.

**Annie Fletcher** It is a valid point. We should we talk about it. It's important to artists.

**Grant Watson** Artists do talk about it. I find most artists quite capable of approaching commercial galleries. They go to galleries to sell their work, not to a public space.

**Brian Hand** Yes, but the audience doesn't make those distinctions.

**Sarah Pierce** Yes they do. I do. I am aware if I am in a public space or a

commercial gallery or a museum.

**Brian Hand** To most people public spaces look like private spaces, private spaces look like public spaces. The same artists that appear at the museum will have a show at a private gallery the same week. All the work is for sale and people who might be afraid of art, would also be afraid because they think, 'That must be worth a fortune.' There is a collapse between private markets and public markets. We need to understand how much public money is spent on individual artworks. OPW (Office of Public Works) are the biggest buyers of art in Ireland. They buy more Irish art than anyone in the world, and they spend a fortune. The amount of money spent by the public state on private art is huge. Money is being spent here, taxpayers money and it is going into commercial galleries. So there is a hidden private market supported by tax payer money.

**Grant Watson** But private galleries have an important function in supporting artworks and showing artists and developing their careers and they don't always get remunerated for it. Not many commercial galleries are making a lot of money from selling artwork. There are a few that do very well, but on the whole galleries struggle. Maureen Paley was living in her house and showing work downstairs and didn't really start selling work until she moved a few years ago. It's wrong to pinpoint galleries and accuse them of making too much money.

**Brian Hand** I'm not accusing anyone. I'm just tracing where public money goes. For instance, Vaari, if someone from OPW comes into Temple Bar Gallery, a publicly funded space, to buy work do you charge them 25% commission?

**Vaari Claffey** Yes.

**Brian Hand** If that same person from OPW walks into a commercial gallery and buys a piece, the gallery gets 50%. There is a private market being supported by public funds. It is a false market. If you cut-out OPW's public funds, all these galleries would go under.

**Alan Phelan** Do you think this affects the kind of work that then gets shown in galleries?

**Brian Hand** Sure, they know who their biggest client is.

**Grant Watson** That's not abnormal. There is a policy in certain museums to collect work, and the state's role in that can be important. It is a record of art works which can then be shown to the public. In most museums 50% of their shows come from the collections.

**Brian Hand** I would really question what the state's role is in art promotion.

**Annie Fletcher** You risk cultural propaganda.

**Brian Hand** With contemporary public art there is a really big issue with who owns it. You sign a contract as an artist and you get a certain amount of money. In many ways you are just providing a service. So if an artist sells a piece of work made through a public commission, the commissioning body will want a cut. In a public art project with four funders, that can be a big percentage.

**Sarah Pierce** What Brian is describing implicates all sorts of people who are making decisions about what works make their way into the state's ownership. I assume from what you are describing OPW are only interested in paintings and prints and not video work, or per-

formance, or sound art.

**Brian Hand** Oh, God no. It's all objects d'art to decorate public offices. There is a book about Charlie Haughey's house and the public money spent on his private commissions. It is astounding. He got Basil Blackshaw to paint a portrait of his horse, Dictator, and he got Anne Madden to do a painting of the garden. Most amazing is that Louis le Brocquy painted one of his Cubist-style heads of Charlie Haughey.

**Sarah Pierce** Who is doing the buying for OPW?

**Brian Hand** Patrick T. Murphy, Chairman of the Arts Council.

**Finola Jones** When does the job come up again?

**Brian Hand** Why don't we charge here to go to art spaces? I know Douglas Hyde did once or twice.

**Finola Jones** Well they tried to. They also charged for wine. That didn't last long.

**Vaari Claffey** Gallery of Photography had an admission charge for the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition.

**Grant Watson** That is the same with White Chapel. One or two shows a year will have an admission fee.

**Annie Fletcher** I don't have a problem with the idea of charging in.

**Brian Hand** But here it is never done. Again, it's a lack of entrepreneurial spirit.

**Grant Watson** If you start to charge for shows you get into issues of which shows sell and which don't. This puts pressure on spaces to produce shows that sell-out.

**Sarah Pierce** To me certain things should be available to everyone. Information is one of them, access to art is another.

**Vaari Claffey** But that means that artists don't get paid.

**Sarah Pierce** It shouldn't. The curator, the technicians, they all get paid.

**Vaari Claffey** I agree the artist should get paid, whether you charge in or not. But charging in can help pay for all those costs.

**Annie Fletcher** I agree, I really don't see the problem with charging in.

**Brian Hand** What's the problem? People go to the Irish Film Centre, it has a broad outreach, and it will put on *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* because Ang Lee distributed it through an art-house distributor, and that made the IFC some money. People lined up for weeks. If the IFC charges in I kind of wonder why other places don't.

**Annie Fletcher** I don't think we are smart about how these economic systems work. Theatre gets huge state funding but it charges in. Why should art be free? Why shouldn't people be paid? Why is an artist not an economically valid person? Why do we breed an expectation in the public that art is something that is not valuable? Not worth paying for?

**Sarah Pierce** Because we risk excluding people at a really fundamental level.

**Grant Watson** Exactly.

**Annie Fletcher** Would you say that about film and cinema, that it is excluding people?

**Brian Hand** And dance and theatre, and music?

**Sarah Pierce** Yes. Some people.

**Grant Watson** I agree. Would you charge into a library?

**Annie Fletcher** I think the principle here is that we will pay for the cinema and theatre and dance, but ultimately we won't pay for art, and artists are the ones who suffer that. We have some very romantic, altruistic notions. All I am arguing for is a reappraisal of our economic status as professionals.

**Finola Jones** More people go to theatre and films than go to galleries.

**Annie Fletcher** I think though that the people going to contemporary art spaces are generally middle class people who can afford to pay.

**Grant Watson** Annie, it goes back to your point about diffusion and audience. The Victoria and Albert Museum in the past was free. You could go in everyday whenever you wanted. You could go for one hour, two hours or five minutes. It was great and I used to go there a lot. Then they put a fee on admission and people stopped going. It cut their audience by more than half. Even to pay once might keep someone away.

**Sarah Pierce** The *Francis Bacon Studio* at the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery is another example of how an admission fee limits a local audience. It is a massive archive and a remarkable resource, but Dublin residents won't keep going back if they have to pay each time. So why bother to have a permanent, public piece in a municipal gallery if access to it is so restrictive? It might as well be in France or England.

**Brian Hand** We shouldn't have to pay to see the work of dead artists. In Ireland this is terrible. Like the new wing at the National Gallery.

**Alan Phelan** I heard Myles Dungan on Rattlebag railing against the National Gallery which charges in to temporary exhibitions, saying 'Why do I have to pay? This is my national gallery.'

**Brian Hand** Well he is right. The idea of seeing work owned by the state and paying for it is wrong.

**Vaari Claffey** Another point that we need to think about is how much of our audience is artists. This is something that always comes into my mind. Charging artists to see the work of other artists.

**Brian Hand** Artists pay money to buy books, they pay money go to the theatre, to go to the cinema, to listen to music, or to buy a CD. If we are willing to pay so much money to see dead artists why won't we pay to see live ones?

**Vaari Claffey** If everybody charged a relative price that would be different.

**Brian Hand** Maybe you should offer the choice to the artist. Who wants to have their work free and who wants to charge in?

**Grant Watson** I could not imagine charging in at Project.

**Brian Hand** Why not? You charge for the theatre and for dance and for music. If you put on some minimalist music upstairs you will charge, but put some minimalist paintings down below, no they are free.

**Grant Watson** We don't want to charge just for the sake of an economic principle do we?

**Vaari Claffey** Charging in is actually a way to come together, to organise.

**Annie Fletcher** Right. If one space alone charges it won't work, but collectively we can begin to think about

our status in the city, and make decisions.

**Finola Jones** I don't mind paying but I'd like it to cover two days. If I am going to see a show, I get really frustrated not have the option to return to see it again. I pay lots of times, but there has to be a way to make it an option. Like at MOMA where Thursday night is free or you can make a donation.

**Annie Fletcher** There are ways to facilitate people going back again and again.

**Brian Hand** Every Sunday is free, every Wednesday is free, and the other days have an admission.

**Annie Fletcher** Just get artist cards or student cards.

**Grant Watson** Annie, I am surprised by your ideas about charging admission.

**Annie Fletcher** There is a naiveté to our reasoning for not charging in. We are not thinking about economic factors. I am frustrated by an idea of economics that prevails in our culture that is not thought through. I've always worked hard to keep things free. But this often means that there isn't a lot of value placed on paying artists and curators as well. I am wondering how to change that.

**Grant Watson** In the 80s, with the market values increasing around contemporary art, people became more savvy about how they promoted work. It caused a hype which meant a more audience-driven, entertainment-driven idea of an exhibition. That's a danger.

**Annie Fletcher** If we are smart people we can complicate that.

**Sarah Pierce** If entertainment comes into the equation, what do people expect when they pay to see art?

**Brian Hand** That's a good discussion. Most people come in and say nothing. They walk in, say this is crap, and leave. With paying they might say, 'Hold on, I have some ownership over this process, I am an investor here, and I think it's crap. I'm going to write a letter and tell you it's crap.' You get 50 letters, where you might have gotten no letters. I mean when nobody turns up and it is free you have to ask yourself some questions about its fundamental value. And about how you run your space. What makes it attractive.

**Sarah Pierce** This is relevant right now in the change in the Department to Art, Tourism and Sport. Art isn't necessarily a leisure activity.

**Finola Jones** Like blockbuster cinema.

**Grant Watson** I agree, art can entertain, but it shouldn't have to.

**Annie Fletcher** There are ways of working this out that don't conflate art and entertainment. Yes art is an amazing elastic space for experimentation. Charging into a space does not destroy that.

**Brian Hand** You can't shut the world off. Art is not excluded from racism, it's a very white world. It has sexism and misogyny. Men make more money as artists than women. It is money all over. There is money laundering, it's got a Mafia, it's got dictators.

**Grant Watson** We don't have to encourage that though. The important issue that Annie raised is people getting paid properly for their work. That's the crucial question. That is another point about Holland. There is a lot of ongoing support that helps individuals.

**Annie Fletcher** In principle it is really great. I just got a stipend which is a new thing for curators, being given money to work on one project over a year. But it's incredibly hard to get a lot of money for one project which means that nobody can think in ambitious terms. And you are smashed down if you do. Everybody gets piddly sums that they can just about survive on and everybody gets used to that.

**Grant Watson** A starvation diet.

**Annie Fletcher** Right. It is so massively democratic, which means that huge sums are spent but across the board and there is not a lot of discrimination. This breeds a culture of mediocrity. There is no focus. To increase the scale of projects is a huge battle. You are called arrogant and elite.

**Sarah Pierce** In Ireland there are similar issues. Funders speak of ambition and artists are dealing with crazy little budgets, if they are lucky, of €2,000 every year or so. Public art schemes award €10,000 or €20,000 and artists are told that is huge. That is not a huge budget for public art. It is wrong to tell artists that it is.

**Annie Fletcher** It's assumed you will ask your friends to do this, that or the other.

**Grant Watson** In England a kind of free-market money system has arrived. Tate Modern in a way is about mass entertainment. It is extremely popular and successful and you have an art market where people sink or swim. That can produce very powerful pieces and very powerful people. At the same time it kind of squeezes out a lot of other more creative experimental and unfashionable work.

**Brian Hand** It also generates a huge amount of irony and cynicism.

**Grant Watson** True. The art stars and the media don't make a particularly healthy environment for artists to work in.

**Sarah Pierce** There is both official and unofficial organising that surrounds cultural work in Dublin. This complicates the relationships between people and institutions. A lot of what happens here relies on informal exchanges, like today. Our conversation is a springboard for other conversations, around other tables...

<sup>1</sup> Multiples commissions limited edition artworks from established and emerging artists.

<sup>2</sup> In 2001, City Arts Centre stopped its exhibitions programme. The Board is currently reviewing its structure.

<sup>3</sup> Arthouse closed in July 2002.

**The Metropolitan Complex** is a Dublin-based project. Participants include artists, curators, students, writers, organisations and audiences interested in opening cultural experiences up to a range of possible representations.

[www.themetropolitancomplex.com](http://www.themetropolitancomplex.com)