



THE TATE GALLERY AND THE CULT OF MODERN ART: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE MILLENNIAL OPENING OF THE NEW BANKSIDE GALLERY

ROBERT DIXON

INCLUDES AN APPENDIX:
THE FINANCIAL MAP OF
BRITISH STATE MODERNISM

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25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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The civil libertarian writer Robert Dixon is the author of *Mathographics* (Dover Publications, New York, 1991), and of *The Baumgarten Corruption* (Pluto Press, London, 1995).

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Director: Dr Chris R. Tame Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb



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1997 is centennial year for the Tate Gallery, time to reflect on its origin, its changing mission, its present load, and its future direction. What began a hundred years ago as a small private foundation of Victorian paintings and sculptures has grown into the command centre of a large public industry, a state Art infrastructure, with many galleries, many colleges and many committee boards appointed. Apart from a marginal curatorial duty with two collections of grand historical paintings, the effect of this industry is mainly to teach, to uphold and to participate in the international cult of Modern Art. This is strange, because the art of Modern Art is increasingly perverse, obscure, dull and doubtful. For the past half century at the Tate, publicly funded purchasing power has grown a hundredfold in real terms while the definition of art has drifted ever further away from common sense and from the rudiments of paint, pictures and ornament.

One Tate Trustee is famous for having made a glass of water on a shelf into an important work of art by no more and no less than its ceremonial inclusion in the 1977 Hayward Annual. Is the Tate kind of contemporary art like it is because of the choice of Trustees, or is it the other way round? Last year, a student of this same Trustee took the top national Art prize at the Tate for glass tanks of this and that. Could a change of Trustees change Tate taste? Alas no, not without fundamental revision of the institution, amounting to a complete break from its past and a dissolution of its present conceptions. The Tate is an eighty year old convert to international Modern Art, not its inventor nor its leader. The Tate has tied itself to a raft and must go where ever it is taken. It floats on an international currency for the word 'art', that which is defined by the story of gallery modernism from Picasso to Pollock, Beuys and beyond. This is so normal and the alternatives so unthinkable that there is no public expectation for national galleries of contemporary art to do otherwise. Although national art galleries claim to offer art history and/or aesthetic highs to a public, they function so well as shrines for ritual attendance that neither history nor visual marvel is needed for their continued existence. The significance of these shrines is clearly concerned with social elevation and wealth rather than with pictorial skills and visual beauty. To continue paying homage to this strangest and most useless example of visual art is bad enough, but to go on escalating its public funding is surely alarming? The 1995 National Lottery award of £50 million to the Tate Gallery to open a giant Modern Art museum at a prime London site passed without a peep in public. In a state of mental ab-

diction we, the nation, build a monument to an absurdity, allowing a cohesive bureaucracy to run and expand a nonsense on automatic pilot.

ARTISTIC PSYCHOSIS

It was around 1915 that the Tate changed course from its founding aim of collecting contemporary British painting. Henry Tate's taste had been for the literary and neoclassical styles of academy art of the day, the very kind of art supplanted as outmoded in the fashionable international rise of Modern Art. So the Tate adopted a revised mission of two collections: one, British painting from all periods; and the other, contemporary foreign painting. The addition of international modern sculpture into the Tate's remit in 1937 probably paved the way to the confusion about media and spatial dimensions which, since about 1972, has allowed the rise of installationism and the demise of colour on canvas that we inherit today. When pickled animals, bits of rope, dirty lino, bricks, brick dust, broken plates, industrial fittings of glass, chrome or ceramic, and all manner of things other than pictures or patterns can be treated as art and hailed as great, then we are in deep trouble. This is the absurdity to which an establishment fallacy about art and values has been long since reduced.

Modern Art is a tale of successive negations in the arts of picture painting and statue sculpture. Despite having had some colourful moments and one vivid pictorial relapse in its earlier stages, Modern Art has followed the absurd rule that no kind of art can be repeated, to its inevitably barren consequences. Renunciation of all that is pictorial and ornamental is the ruling principle of this artistic and aesthetic heresy. The story is told as if it were the story of art in modern times, the continuation of a millennial epic, from Lascaux to now. It is no such thing. It is a side show of weird art, a solemn enactment of artistic psychosis in the guise of artistic elevation. The art — untypical, unimportant, unpromising and over-hyped — suffers from a pathological insistence on innovation and a devotion to sensuous inhibition. Of course, in real life, the camera and print were atomic detonations in the psyche and technology of art, in the truly millennial story. In the story of Modern Art — which is not a story of art in general but of an art in particular, one which is not central nor impressive as art, and one whose parameters are institutional, social and economic rather than aesthetic and artistic — a theatre of wistful contrariness, in the face of overwhelming odds of the mechanised

image and factory form, is paraded as the stuff of utmost profundity.

Modern Art is not modern art in general, nor typical, nor exemplary. It is an international cult of gallery art whose inscrutable strangeness and obscurity in apparent absence of pictorial evocation or ornamental effect occupies the place where once upon a time high society had visible artistic quality. Modern Art is a misnomer, a non sequitur, and a category mistake. It is not ‘art in modern times’, nor the counter-part of art in history. The capitalised Art of modern production is not a quality of art, it is a kind of art. Nearly all living artists are excluded from its canon not by quality but by style and content.

It is time to call a halt to this costly habit of artistic retention and aesthetic mythology. Instead of allowing the present nexus of private dealers and public officials to divine a royal lineage of anti-art in the name of art, we could throw the field open to all styles of painted picture and ornament and reverse the tendency to selection. If we change the constitution of the Tate to allow any style of picture or pattern and to drop the perverse devotions to innovation and originality (which were never real in any case) then we might instead discover variety and quality, perhaps through some suitable public expression of visual interest. The official line is set on deathly course. Also we should aim to minimise the cost of art not maximise it, as the present collecting and canonising habit does. Now is the time for the public to whom the gallery is dedicated to wake up to a nonsense and take control. For the Tate is a monster of public funding without public accountability. It can hardly get worse and it is definitely getting more expensive.

Reading Carol Duncan on the history of Art museums, we see that Modern Art inherits a temple created in the 19th century, a public museum of history and splendour in mainly grand painting and some sculpture, the canon of old masters. Art museums began as aristocratic treasure opened to the public, a field of holy relics, a fetish. The belief is that some essence of ‘civilisation’ inheres in these rare objects, held in trust by the nation for the people, with the power over viewing visitors of cultural or spiritual levitation. It may be true enough that the frescoes, temperas and oil paintings of church, royalty and aristocracy, collected for gentlemen in the 18th century and converted to public collections in the 19th century, contain the momentous story of artistic revival in Europe with peak exemplars of pictorial technique. But Modern Art has clearly shown that this is not the essence of ‘culture’ or ‘civilisation’ to which museum goers continue to flock.

Modern Art is an abrupt about face as a continuation of the story of art, a melodramatic rejection of pictorial or ornamental effect. Of course, the material outcome of such an artistic ambition can only have highly limited appeal as art, and cannot be compared to the main thrust of modern art, the mass media. What Modern Art does have in common with the historical canon is the reduction of significance to a limited number of named artists arranged in a lineage. This may suit the market logic of gilt-edged securities, but it is an invention that bears no

resemblance to the history of actual art in modern times. What Modern Art does not have in common with the historical canon is pictorial power and visual appetite. Nor does it have the necessary museum separation between collector and collected: old masters were not made for museums whereas Modern Art is. The exhibitions and purchases of a museum like the Tate engender in their selected objects and makers the very ‘importance’ which the museum purports to be collecting. The kind of art which aspires to be canonic Modern Art seeks recognition through gallery exhibition. Increasingly, what art galleries show has nowhere else to go but in galleries. The field follows the museum and the museum follows the field. This is a fatal collapse into meaningless feedback.

The high artistic quality of old masters is not in doubt, and can be marvellous to behold. It is also a mundane fact of economic life in a pre-industrial age that this art with high qualities of technique was nurtured by a social elite. It may be in its symbolic association with nobility and authority that fine art primarily impresses the viewer, brought into formal rites of appreciation via gallery attendance or art history study, rather than the cognitive marvels of pictorial skills. We live in an age where old master pictorial skills with oil on canvas are but infant babblings compared to modern powers of depiction and expression. These modern powers were unleashed by print and photography, followed by cinema and television. The principle of mass reproduction for mass markets has revolutionised the human condition. The pricing arithmetic of art and pictorial power has been turned upside down. Cheap art has it, expensive Art doesn’t. Modern Art is a market confidence trick which has invested its story of progressive artistic debilitation with the universally accepted myth of artistic inheritance as a royalty of innovators. It may have begun as a colourful play with loose pictorial impressions instead of painstaking drawing, an easy art for all-comers, but today it has become an art for nobody, an arbitrary array of acts or objects which in any circumstances other than gallery exhibition and artworld endorsement would be regarded as unsightly, unintelligible or useless. Modern Art is the veneration of a line of names in the museums and in the ‘history of art’, determined by a confluence of officials and dealers. Its artistic development has been a reduction of visual interest or meaning. Modern Art extends the portfolio of investment art, trading in a certified rarity and forging a symbolic association with wealth and authority.

A MEMORIAL TO ONE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY’S SILLIEST MYTHS

In the year 2000 the Tate Gallery is to open a giant public gallery of Modern Art at Bankside. This will be a huge expansion of an institution whose conception of contemporary art has provoked public cynicism and ridicule for the past two decades, yet which is being made possible by a fast flood of public cash. It is clear that this plan has been hatched without proper public reflection and consent. Do we really want to mark the millennium with a memorial to one of the twentieth century’s

silliest myths, one that has an in-built appetite for continued public expenditure, and one that carries a deathly message of sensory denial and social deference?

The Tate will divide its two quite different collections and functions, housed to date under one roof at Millbank, leaving the historical British collection there, and moving the international Modern Art to the new Bankside site, a converted power station next door to Shakespeare's reconstructed Globe Theatre. The National Gallery in Trafalgar Square has agreed to stop more sharply its own collection of international painting at 1900 and, in a mutually beneficial exchange arrangement, to let the Tate have its few items of twentieth century painting, including a large Monet pond picture. The plan seems so logical and inevitable, a trio of state galleries: international historical; international Modern; and British both. Brian Sewell has pointed out the gaping collection holes in the post-impressionist to surrealist phase of Modern Art and we can therefore expect to have to pay many further fortunes to live up to the ambition of having a national gallery of Modern Art of international standing, quite apart from the ongoing purchases of contemporary Art. A state gallery of this kind is a monster made to eat money. It is party to a cultic practice that we should now discontinue.

While the annual shenanigan at the Tate of the Turner Prize has gone on raising eyebrows, it is as nothing compared with the Bankside project. When the enormity of the expanded Tate hits us in the face we might at last cry foul and demand a return to common sense. But we really should be starting the debate now. We still have three years before opening time to get the conception into perspective and to plan for a revised inventory of modern art.

Of course, there are many who will argue that such fortunes of public expenditure should be devoted to more pressing social causes, such as housing, health or education. Certainly when one learns that the Tate has spent, for example, more than half a million pounds on one Joseph Beuys installation, then the near criminal nature of such a waste of public funds on an inscrutable artifact of no human value leaves a bitter taste and a shock of disbelief that cuts off all sympathy for the very idea of visual art. If, however, we can keep a clear enough head to realise that it is only ever gallery modernism that offends us as expensive nonsense, not visual art in general, then we can proceed with an open mind to audit the institutional record and to consider radical curative surgery. So, for the sake of argument, let us accept the given idea of pumping public money into a cathedral space for visual art, and boldly go where no Tate Trustee has ever stepped, to discuss what visual art of our time really is important, representative and spectacular.

To begin with, we should recognise that the opening of the defunct power station as a venue for public congregation will greatly benefit the adjoining riverside location as a pedestrian amenity for the capital. This aspect of the site and of the whole South Bank development should focus our minds on the real aesthetic issue of modernity, the environment of our senses. The traffic-free, riverside walk is the chief attraction. It would be a great pity if an

entrance fee or a choice of art effected a socio-economic bias of invitation and association.

The new Tate will be the nation's flagship of contemporary visual art as conceived by an on-going alliance of Government and Gallery. The conception is an inevitable development of a century old pattern of thinking. It is an intention of state, maintaining a long-standing order for funding the Arts. It is decreed by ministers, designed by civil servants and administered by directors. It goes ahead despite public disaffection and despite the lack of any objective measure of its worth. If pressed for justification, those who are involved with its implementation, or who are inclined to support it, will recite what amounts to a vague oath of allegiance to a mystic cause, provision of Art, conceived as a sort of civilising vitamin affecting people and places.

This faith is so ludicrous that even the advocates of Modern Art funding will rapidly abandon it in favour of the tourist argument. This states that tourism is a major industry benefiting the national economy, and that tourists come to see such things as museums of Modern Art. Two replies must be given straight away. First, this is an argument for finding a more popular use for the building, not an argument for Modern Art as such. Second, and more importantly, this argument relinquishes the mystical claims for Modern Art. It drops the attempt to maintain an artistic or aesthetic theory or persuasion. It resorts to economic criteria and purpose.

ART BECOMES ANTI-ART

A massive sleight of hand operates in the application of the label "Arts", combining suspect generality with reprehensible particularity. On the one hand, dance, drama, music and visual art are lumped together to form a homogeneous "good cause"; while on the other hand, each art is selectively represented in a marked and narrow manner. The sample of contemporary visual art bought by the Tate, for example, is highly peculiar and unrepresentative. The capital A in the label "Arts" signals a distinction which speech effects by a mock posh accent, thus giving the game away. What unites the various arts which are included in the Arts and separates them from arts which are excluded is a social distinction, not a question of artistic standard or of aesthetic issues — colour, texture, resolution, composition.

Of course, it is supposed to be a quality distinction, but we are apt to get a blurred head when faced with displays of social elevation and naked wealth. In a former age of handicrafts, when aristocrats were the chief patrons and consumers of the finest arts, the equation of quality art with Quality Street was an empirical fact for obvious economic reasons. But in our age of mechanical reproduction and mass markets, that relation cannot hold. Snap! Quality Street art must mark out its Quality Street identity by means other than quality. Snap! An art of outstanding quality becomes an art of outstanding kind instead. The art becomes anti-art. The contemporary art of Quality Street proclaims a sort of holy state of modernity as its faith or ethic, while pursuing the unpromising and tiresome strategy of unpicking every rule of art

and renouncing every pictorial and ornamental achievement. A canon of innovations which are never used is venerated. This is an art, which no matter how good, is never worth copying. Clearly, here is a pathological flow of public expenditure in the name of visual art.

Nevertheless, the quality argument for exclusively funding those arts we call the Arts persists to tangle with our social reflexes and confuse our categories of value. Each of the Arts combines a baffling polarity of the old and the new. The old is a lovingly maintained antique art with evident artistic excellence. The new is an apparently absurd or facile demonstration of artistic retention, accompanied by an impenetrable testament for artistic genius. The new Art is ordained as the strictly limited reincarnation of the old Art. We snapp'd a hundred years ago and have continued ever since to deepen the derangement. What started out as fun with colour and paint - gallery painting in an age of photography — has turned today into an austere ministry of installations.

When we let the Tate open our temple to ‘modern art’ on the Monday morning of the new millennium we shall be marking our time with a triumphal affirmation of gallery modernism. We should instead mark our passage by leaving it behind in the twentieth century. We should take the opportunity of the forthcoming millennial festivities to not only refurbish a defunct building but also to rehabilitate a defective conception. We should abandon the worship of Modern Art and withdraw public support for its ritual elevation and civic enshrinement. We could do this by opening the planned national gallery of modern art at Bankside on time, but making sure that the art on show there is the true modern art. The true modern art is not, nor is it anything like, the inventory of certified oddities that is the stuff of gallery modernism and which the keepers of the Tate presently have in store for us.

Let us take the phrase “modern art” to task. Well, “modern” is a straightforward temporal adjective, meaning all that is now and recent; or, all that is typical or peculiar to the now and recent. But art theory has turned “modern” into a stylistic adjective referring to the strange canon of gallery modernism. The millennial definition of visual “art” is pictorial image and/or chromatic/spatial ornament. Visual art is a category of artifact, not a quality of execution nor a mark of social refinement. It is a cognitively defined kind of artifact: that which is made to engage human visual intelligence with pictorial evocation or ornamental effect. Visual art is not an ethic or a context or a style or a purpose. Visual art serves all people at all times, whatever their religion, whatever their morality. The word “art” is like “transport”, a generic term for a practical matter, and operates on the same level of human facility and culture as “speech” or “writing”. It is a universal. It refers to something which all human societies and sub-societies do and which figures as an important component of virtually all cultures. What a mask is to a tribal village, a graffiti is to an urban alley, a mural to an Egyptian temple, a marble statue to a Greek city, an altarpiece to a mediaeval cathedral. And so on.

But how so on? Where do we in modern times fit into this conceptual pattern? The keepers of the Tate would have you complete the chain of associations by linking modern life to the peculiar canon of gallery modernism with its roll call of names set in concrete — from Picasso through Duchamp to Pollock, Rothko, Andre, Beuys and Hirst. This is a *non sequitur*. For this kind of art, gallery modernism, is very strange, very untypical, very restricted, very negative, very obscure, very dull, very inbred, pretentious and unaccountable. By utter contrast, society at large proceeds to make images on a scale of production, density of distribution and depth of pictorial facility unknown in any previous society. This is the true modern art. If you want to know what the real art of modern times is like then look into the eyes of modern people. Do not listen to the sophistries of abstruse art theory. Clock the eye-contact time of typical citizens — and so-called art experts as well. What is it we all look at? What is it that captivates our thoughts and feelings? What moves us? What do we worship? What do we idolise? What plays the role of social significance? What displays the peculiarly modern capacities for visual articulation? Where is the state of the art of genuine visual artistry demonstrated? Never in a hundred years should we answer these questions the way the Tate Gallery has to date and plans to do again in the year 2000.

The Tate is a curious institution: part private, part public. Since Henry Tate founded it in 1897 with his gift of a private collection to the nation, it has continued to receive financial support on a voluntary basis, including a fortune from an anonymous Briton abroad. A board of Trustees governs its art purchasing policy and staff appointments under the double mission of collecting past and present British painting and international Modern Art. It is the policy of collecting Modern Art which has proved controversial and coloured the name Tate with connotations of artistic paradox and offence or hoax. Since about 1972 the purchases and exhibitions of Modern Art have frequently enraged the British public. The names Carl André, Joseph Beuys, Rachel Whiteread, Damien Hirst and Turner Prize figure uppermost in the minds of those who associate the Tate with art of an objectionable and spurious kind. The plan to open a second Tate gallery in London in the Bankside power station is designed to separate the two Tate collections.

THE RISK OF AWAKENING JOE PUBLIC

The plan is not without its risks for the Trustees. For by separating these two quite different art collections, the public venom that predictably gathers around any notable modernist excess will focus on a building which is entirely devoted to Modern Art. The old Tate Gallery proved very disarming to persons outraged by bricks or pickled animals, dirty nappies or bits of string. The building's entrance and foyer is perhaps the finest piece of neo-classical architecture on the tourist treadway, confronting the senses with immensely soothing masses of polished marble, loftiness, simplicity and cool roomy light. For many stormy years Rodin's famous sculpture of life-size naked lovers kissing in white stone stillness confronted all who entered at intimate range. At Bank-

side, the Tate will have to achieve something similar. It will deploy the Rodin, because it has the date 1901-4 and despite the fact that its charm owes more to neoclassicism than modernism. It will deploy Monet and other colourful early and popular modernists. But above all, it will deploy the architectural impact of vast scale in the building. As well as the impressive hulk seen from outside, the interior has a main hall in the shape of a long tall box vault of such huge dimensions that this will be the chief ammunition of grandeur. A space created for industrial function is to be emptied out and used to dwarf a congregation. This giant frame will work its placebo effect on the innocent eye to confirm and raise yet higher the mythic importance of Modern Art. It will rudely ride the boast of being the biggest museum of Modern Art in the world on the size of the building. The Trustees better hope that it does not dwarf the art or draw attention to the conceit. The Tate will enshrine its catalogue of artistic obscurantism in a building so enormous that it risks awakening Joe Public to a grotesque megalomania.

“MODERN ART” VERSUS THE HANDMADE IMAGERY OF A FREE MARKET ECONOMY

Moreover, the separation of the two collections threatens to undermine the insinuation of continuity with neoclassical art so necessary in the advocacy of Modern Art. We all acknowledge artistic excellence in old masters, such as Michelangelo, Vermeer or even Constable, and readily go along with the sense of curatorial reverence and public celebration at these past wonders of pictorial art. As well as being well-crafted, the artworks in question are rare and acquire very high investment prices on an art collector’s market. Knowledge of the fortunes paid for such objects greatly colours our reverence and wonder. Also, much of the art in question is associated with pious worship and ideals, in religion and classical philosophy. Galleries of such pictures therefore become holy shrines to relics whose aura of high value alloys high finance and high society with high ideals, aesthetic riches and artistic skill. The cult of Modern Art seeks to extend this pseudo-religiosity and the investments portfolio into present times. The high prices and high esteem are bestowed on a modern canon. It is vital in this trick of market and cultural confidence to insinuate that somehow what Michelangelo was to the renaissance so Picasso was to the roaring twenties or Damien Hirst is to the technopop present. Of course, this is absurd. It is a sophistry. We pay educated lip service to it but go about our daily life demonstrating an altogether different visual taste in images and ornaments. Also, the investment market dictates that Modern Art must be a material scarcity. In an age of reproduction and mass markets this has meant developing an art of such perverse peculiarity that no popular emulation is likely to follow.

The planned Tate Gallery of Modern Art will not be art, modern, nor Tate. We can suppose that Henry Tate wanted his gallery to further the cause of painting and sculpture in Britain. The modern world was already breaking around him in his lifetime. Manufacture, photography and printing had arrived and were already undermining the role of handcrafted images and ornaments.

There are many good reasons why we should share this concern for the handmade, but without resorting to a vague spiritualist mumbo jumbo on its behalf. In fact, the role of hand-crafting in making images and ornament has survived in the modern world, as anyone can see who cares to check the scene carefully. Any real museum of modern art should reflect this. But the way to do this is not pick and choose according to some prescriptive notion of what painting and drawing should be doing. The way to do it is by dispassionate survey. Hollywood film posters, book covers, magazine illustrations, scientific diagrams, for examples, all demonstrate a continuing role for handmade imagery in a modern free-market economy. To interpret Henry Tate’s wish with adherence to the cult of gallery modernism is clearly perverse. The Gallery’s founder could not possibly have foreseen nor conceived of the things that were to be collected in his name in the following twentieth century. And it is obvious that gallery modernism, contrary to Henry Tate’s purpose, has served directly, primarily and ruthlessly to attack, to ostracise and to disparage the arts of handmade pictures and statues. On these grounds alone, the gallery of modern art to be opened at Bankside in the name of Tate should be disassociated from gallery modernism.

In any case, even if Henry Tate had foreseen gallery modernism and signalled his approval for it, we should not be tied to the absurdity. For all its private funding, the Tate Gallery is primarily upheld by the public purse and it does parade itself as the national arbiter of visual art. Although it has proceeded thus far in an autocratic fashion, it really should hand itself over now to public guidance and accountability. Its record to date in purchasing and exhibiting shows a chronic constriction of taste for the dullest and most doubtful art in the land and an incurable habit of collecting. In this narrow state of mind, if Beuys is declared a major modernist the Tate is as duty-bound to buy a Beuys as it is to exclude virtually every other kind of art from consideration. The process of Arts funding, of art selection and staff-recruitment has worked for years to confirm and facilitate this policy. Therefore, so long as we allow the Tate to run our visual art museum, things are likely to stay bad and get worse. We, the great British public, should now step in, claim the right to re-draft the instructions to stop collecting and to start showing genuinely interesting, skillful, representative, innovative art of our time. It’s broke, so let’s fix it. We have the right by virtue of the public funding that shores it up. The sum of money involved in the upkeep and extension of our national shrine to Modern Art is huge and renders the Tate Gallery morally answerable to us.

A CULT WHICH ENJOYS PERMANENT CROSS-PARTY SUPPORT

Let us outline this public funding to get the scale and structure of it in perspective and to dispel any claims on behalf of the Tate Gallery of private initiative and independence. First, the Bankside refurbishment is to be paid for by the National Lottery award of £50 million. The building, a former public utility asset, is being donated by Nuclear Electric plc. Southwark Council is to be con-

gratulated for supporting the plan and to be forgiven for not knowing any better about Art nonsense. Second, the Tate Gallery has been a chief annual recipient of government funding for visual Art during the postwar period. The part of this money set aside by the Tate for purchasing contemporary art has been used year in year out to buy up at great expense, mostly for storage, crate after crate of gallery modernism. Already, the debt to the public is overwhelming, but there is more. There are all the other publicly funded galleries — Serpentine, Hayward, Whitechapel, ICA and so on — which uphold the common cult of gallery modernism and all the college departments of fine art which train thousands of young people every year for the rare job of gallery modernist. All those shows, all those purchases, all those staff, all those buildings are maintained at public expense. This is the infrastructure which makes the collective enterprise of Modern Art tick over. The patronage flows out from ministers via civil servants down to committees by appointment in a process of selection that self-perpetuates its morbid condition. No aesthetic or artistic criterion is ever put into words. It thrives under carefully manicured levels of public hostility and indifference. Here is a cult which enjoys permanent cross-party support for its long-standing devotion to an art which has deliberately distanced itself from public interest and comprehension. This is a nation which spends billions on modernist art and not a penny on, for example, mathematical art. We readily hand over our cash and surrender responsibility for making sense about art.

THE MANY GENRES OF CONTEMPORARY IMAGES AND ORNAMENTS

It is a philosophical sickness acted out in public. Our museums of so-called “modern” so-called “art” display a funereal aesthetic of sensory withdrawal at a time when civilisation has abruptly savaged the environment of our eyes, ears and noses and saturated our heads with vivid pictorial excess. If we are to celebrate the Millennium with positive mood and truthful account we should depart from the long-standing artofficial nonsense. We can open a gallery of images of the here and now with a full heart and a ready-made flood of excitement and beauty. To clarify our philosophy, we can divide the exhibition space at Bankside as planned into a series of peripheral rooms and one huge hall. The peripheral rooms would offer a representative showing of the many genres of contemporary images and ornaments. This would mean one room alone devoted to the story of gallery modernism and its current offering. Two rooms could be devoted to representing the real contemporary state of the manual arts of painting and sculpture. A room could be devoted to *trompe-l'oeil* illustration, another to comic strip and another to computer graphics. Other rooms could show photo-journalism, popular icons, product advertisements, technical drawing and so on. Fashion, fabrics and furnishings would provide the best guide to a modern skill with colour and ornament. Most representation in the gallery would be miniaturised tokenism, because it would show only what is already ubiquitous. For this and other

reasons, therefore, pride of place as a magnified attraction and heart of the show should go to the art of science.

The millennial definition of art fixes on image-making in its conceptual generality, not some strange and doubtful particular. We want our gallery to show the best. Therefore, there can be no question that science is making the best images today. Science, governed by a pure pursuit for objective clarity, combines numerate rigour with visual engagement of a vital kind. We wish to see the world for what it really is, free from all ideology and censorship. We have always found it deeply beautiful and immensely fascinating. For more than a century science has been using the modern image-making technology to see more and to see it sharply. Techniques such as high-speed or time-lapse photography and cinematography have revealed to our eyes what was hitherto too fast, too slow, or too dim to see. Extension beyond the visual spectrum has brought us radio maps, thermal imaging, electron scanning micrographs. Digital storage and computing have led to a revolution in image making and processing which is particularly well driven in astronomy, geography and meteorology, molecular chemistry, subatomic physics, archaeology and mathematics. The scientific pursuit of demonstrable knowledge combined with the part played by human sight thus provides a wealth of items to display which are both visually rich and spiritually valuable in the study of nature. The gallery would only be special if it showed what is otherwise not available. So as a defining example of this purpose we can set ourselves the giant innovative and challenging technical task of imaging the whole earth in high resolution on large display.

Many streams of sensory information currently flow from satellite viewpoints in radio transmissions to the ground from which a spectacular picture of the planet can be constructed. The talk of quality in this project would equate “fine” with graphically sharp, not socially discriminating. Our aesthetic needs are simply to see it in the finest possible detail and to be faced with a coherent experience. The project could begin on day one, in pieces if necessary, and proceed to build as best we can. Only when such an image becomes publicly available elsewhere would the Tate need to find another picture to make.

SOUL-DESTROYING PROCEDURES

The biggest lesson we should learn from the absurdity to which gallery modernism has reduced our notion of art is that to foster an art whose only outlet is gallery exhibition and whose only aim is to be exceptional, is a recipe for paradox, social detachment and artistic degeneration. If galleries are funded to collect gallery art then artists will aspire to fill them, trying earnestly and hopelessly to second-guess what counts as correct in a system which is invidious and devoid of public criteria. It is bound to end up as it has done, with a discordant noise (metaphorically speaking) of feedback in recursive self-reference. It is bound to be a weird, impractical, unpopular art. It seeks its accreditation in a rich investments market and offers as its only bodily purpose the mark of social

distinction. The more we fund this monster the more it will spend on making its show of absent art look expensive.

As the art of Modern Art springs forth in pursuit of gallery glory it shapes and scales itself accordingly. Canvases become too large to house in normal rooms. An open floor-sized oil sump, commercial loads of building materials, room-filling blocks of concrete, and many another installation demonstrate the inclination to a bigness and extravagance which at once helps to defeat the resources of multitudinous artistic competition working with regular art materials on a domestic scale, and also impresses the viewer with the trappings of high finance endowment. The growth in public funding of this expenditure and its promotion has gone on against a background of recession and declining public services, either despite it or simply unnoticed by an innumerate electorate. The financial map of State Modernism is complex. Modern Art is publicly funded under at least four different government headings: Education, Heritage, Arts and Lottery. Of the five 'good causes' taking equal shares of National Lottery payouts, Modern Art can seek funding through three of them: Heritage, Arts and Millennium. As the national flagship gallery of Modern Art funded annually from the National Heritage department, the Tate Gallery was bound to be an early and chief recipient of National Lottery money the day the minister signed the Lottery Act. Its choice of Millennium Commission funds for its Bankside application was inspired milkmaidship, but one which may yet rebound on it when we have had time to reflect on the symbolic significance of marking our entry into the new century with a mausoleum to a fraud of the old century. The money runs down these channels to be turned into a production of grand ceremony around apparent emptiness. This is at a time when the national will to fund genuinely philanthropic causes is wilting in the winds of greed, selfishness and privatisation. And the waste is not merely public cash. There is a human toll, a youth corruption scheme, an organised sacrifice. Virtually all of the thousands of students who are trained each year in the ways of contemporary fine art are cast off after four, six or ten years apprenticeship, discarded as surplus to requirements in the selection process. It has been estimated that at any one time there are ten thousand trained gallery artists renting East London studios waiting for the jackpot prize of 'discovery' by an art official. But perhaps worse even than that, they have been educated in the perverse impulses of gallery modernism, brainwashed until every flicker of aesthetic and artistic reaction is tuned to an ingrained mental habit of anti-art. These are soul-destroying procedures.

This huge industry of money sucking and mind melting nonsense continues under the full gaze of public view, without hardly a single voice of dissent. The structure of support for the institutions and creed of State Modernism is surely responsible for this. Media and education carry a unanimous affirmation of its mysteries. Armies of advocates, critics, teachers and bureaucrats are funded and employed to preach its gospel. No one is funded to contradict it. There is no space or forum which will entertain a doubt, despite doubt being rife outside the organs

of Art salesmanship. Only one MP, Terry Dicks, and one newspaper critic, Brian Sewell, are ever heard to break rank with a totalitarian approval of Arts funding and its visual art product.

WE COULD REWRITE THE HISTORY OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

Brian Sewell's response to the announcement of the "Bankside Folly" was to suggest it be called the Serota Gallery, not Tate. He draws attention to the serious change in the meaning of "art" at the Tate since about 1972, already alluded to and corresponding coincidentally with the budding of the present Tate director's Art bureaucratic career. Up till then, art, whether of neoclassical ilk and craft or of the modernist canon - which began its tradition of progressively slipshod brushwork and frequent enjoyment of colour in precise opposition to Henry Tate Art - was always and primarily colour on the plane. After 1972, when the Tate Gallery bought Carl André's bricks, a suitable landmark event for a new definition of art, this abruptly ceased to be so. Painting, which in the course of Modern Art had been treated to every conceivable experiment in brushwork, colour and figuration, ceased to be at the heart of the meaning of art. This death of a medium has been every bit as dramatic as the death of a style when Henry Tate Art was superseded by Modern Art. But the process by which painting and sculpting have lost their place in the meaning and practice of art has been by tortuous degrees. The precedent was set in Dada, a self-consciously infantile protest against continuing faith in Art. Duchamp famously exhibited a common urinal in 1917. But the recipe of take-any-object proved as marketable as the Modern Art recipe of make-any-paintmark, and it was revived with official approval and in more expensive and solemn form to foreclose the colourful 1960's. Minimalisms, conceptualisms and installations introduced the idea that "art" can be boxes, girders, string, old lino, broken crockery, dirty nappies, pickled animals, dust, glasses of water and indeed anything but painting and sculpture.

Few can remember before 1915, but many can remember the distinctly different feeling when Art was painting and drawing of some kind at least. Within the gallery-going constituency, I would imagine that a majority could be roused to support a clear and justifiable complaint against the abandonment of painting and sculpture in the steering of the Tate since 1972. As well as Brian Sewell, they would find the editors of *Modern Painters* and *Art Review* standing on this ground. If this groundswell of opinion should ever materialise it would be an opportunity to revise the conception which insists we search in Dalai Lama fashion for the line of geniuses and squander all our funds on inflated collectors prices. We should instead recognise all styles and a sea of talent. We could rewrite the history of painting and sculpture and find ways of involving a wide public in decisive selection.

Interested parties should read Sewell carefully. He is the only British Art Critic to have almost unreservedly called the bluff of post-1972 Art, and to have rudely exposed the nature of the problem:

The new priesthood, Nicholas Serota and his compliant minions at the Tate Gallery and the officials of the Arts Council and its many subsidiary quangos, a closely interwoven group all sitting on each others' bodies; their number very small and very powerful; their language deliberately obscure and often meaningless, their orthodoxy narrow and intolerant, are now the absolute arbiters of taste and patronage, the experts who decide what shall be seen and subsidised ...

Brian Sewell, *An Alphabet of Villains*

They minister to a "superstitious belief" that whatever you find in a gallery is art (no matter how unlikely) and that the artist is a genius (no matter how improbable). But Sewell personalises the problem with his suggestion of a name for the Bankside Tate. It would be better to call it The National Gallery of International Gallery Modernism. The present director merely inherited the course set since 1972, a course perhaps determined in 1915 and 1937.

There are several serious problems with the very idea of a national gallery of modern art. It extends the practice of 'heritage' to the breaking point of the present. It adopts an inappropriate notion of masterpiece from the conception of a national gallery of historical art. When transposed into Modern Art, it is not pictorial craft and technical innovation which marks out candidates for collectability, but notorious oddity endorsed by market performance. A "museum of contemporary art" should at best be ephemeral and superfluous, and at worst is a contradiction in terms. To have a gallery of gallery art is a Russellian riddle courting incestuous absurdity. On the other hand, there is a certain absurdity in the corrective idea of a gallery to show the more interesting and typical modern art, since it would most accurately only show what most modern people see most of.

Plays are written for theatres and films made for cinemas, so what is wrong with art for galleries? Plays and films have narrative and motion in time to entertain the stationary audience. Galleries of art history provide a static exhibition for perambulating viewers, but the items on show all come from non-gallery contexts, testifying to the varied and integrated locations of art in social space and place. Much more significant is that theatre and cinema thrive without public funding. In cybernetic terms, paying audience patronage provides the positive/negative feedback to guide the product intelligently. It seems entirely likely that galleries of painting would either improve dramatically or die naturally if public funding was cut off.

THEY COLLECT IT IF IT IS IMPORTANT — IT IS IMPORTANT IF THEY COLLECT IT

The Tate Gallery only displays and collects the kind of art shown in galleries, and is itself the biggest gallery in Town and heavily involved in the processes determining which art is to be classified as collectible. This is where the scent of scandal hangs on the institutional analysis. There is a total collapse of museological detachment. Much of Modern Art is only famous because it has been

enshrined in museums. Much of it is made for museum display. Museum display is its consummation. Museums actively show and purchase the works of contemporary Artists and so participate in their promotion to the status of 'important', and therefore collectable by museums.

For example, consider the high profile case of Damien Hirst. Before he won the Tate Gallery's 1995 Turner prize his career had been sponsored again and again by public Art promotions, starting with his time at Goldsmith's College, followed by his selection for exhibitions. The selectors are a cohesive group of officials, collectors and artists with a richly intertwined weave of mutual interests. Hirst's mentor at Goldsmiths was Michael Craig-Martin, he of glass of water fame and long time Tate Trustee. The history of Modern Art is an act of promotion with self-confirming powers through telling, collecting and display.

The museum is collecting a blessing dispensed by museum collection. There are no claims of quality or value which can be independently tested. The museums collect it if it is 'important': it is 'important' if museums collect it.

The short-listing process for the Turner Prize encapsulates the general method in the public patronage of contemporary Art. Artists are chosen who have had a successful exhibition career, including private and public galleries. It is a bootstrap method of self-vindication. Two key objections apply here. First, it is entirely regrettable that we should accept successful private gallery exhibition as a criterion of artistic worth. It is a mistake to confuse the concept of art with the economics of a market in expensive rarities notorious for investment return. Second, the part played in public gallery exhibition begs the question of selection criteria and helps to prime the pump of private gallery marketing success. The fact that cliques of dealers, directors, artists and critics operate to control and to benefit from this engine of finance only makes the matter worse.

The building of a pedestrian underpass at Blackfriars bridge in 1995 greatly extended the South Bank riverside walk from County Hall to now reach Bankside. Go and look at the power station that is to become your Tate gallery. It towers above you and the Elizabethan replica Globe Theatre next door, an immense rectangular shell with a chimney spire going yet higher. It aligns with, vies with, and exceeds in size, St. Paul's Cathedral across the water; and with which it is to be linked by the planned new Thames footbridge. The power station is on the scale of an Egyptian pyramid and looks set to serve a similar necrophiliac sentiment. This is your future. Ghostly halls of industrial energy will be financed for worship of an illusion of art. The great ship of State Modernism stands empty in the dock ready to carry our twentieth century cargo of fake feelings. Go now. Go have a look. The walk is lovely. Go and be shocked by the enormity of it, and reflect on what it could be instead. Shall we enter the new century like sleepers in the night? Or shall we shout "No, enough!". We have three years to wake up.

SOME OF US CAN WAKE UP NOW

A forlorn hope? I guess so. Judging by the complacent ease in high and middle society with the condition of public Art and its public expenditure, it is hard to detect a will to reform the official philosophy of art and aesthetics. The chronic collapse of reason in the theory and the charade of art shows in the practice is established in the fabric of the nation. It is congealed in the institutions and in the educated habits of mind. Thousands are employed in hundreds of buildings to repeat its creed of avant garde mythology, until the individual sanity is overwhelmed with nowhere to go. For those who want it, here is a mission of transcendence, to 'subvert perception' as if to prove a state of moral redemption by aesthetic self-denial. The entire effect of this field is an affectation of sensory superiority and artistic inspiration, a badge of spurious rebellion.

But some of us can wake up now and maybe the rest will when the new Tate opens. Fortunately, the building refurbishment being undertaken for the Tate is not itself a cause for despair. The architects, are working to provide

a visually pleasing recreational space with many peripheral rooms for galleries, shops and restaurants, and one enormous nave space. It would be very easy to think of equally popular or more popular uses of that space for display and public congregation, involving completely revised notions of content and function. I have suggested one.

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APPENDIX: THE FINANCIAL MAP OF BRITISH STATE MODERNISM

Public subsidy of the Arts, as we know it, is half a century old. The size of grant-in-aid from the government to the Arts Council had steadily grown since inception fifty-fold in real terms by 1994, when the arrival of the National Lottery promptly doubled it. In the first two years of operation, it is surely a remarkable fact that the National Lottery payouts to the Arts per year, calculated as a fifth of 'good causes' revenue from a mass experiment in blind chance, has slightly more than equalled the current grant-in-aid to the Arts. The figures are £250 million and £226 million, respectively. Of course, this overnight doubling of public funds has caused a crisis in public sector Arts. With such an embarrassment of riches, the earlier government promise, so carefully and audibly extracted, that Lottery money would not be used to substitute for government money seems likely to fall and is hard to defend.

So far, these roughly equal sums of money to the Arts, from government and Lottery, have been kept apart by the rule that Lottery cash is for capital projects. In the first two years of the National Lottery, therefore, there has been a nationwide rash of building, renovation, refurbishment, and equipment purchasing. Already the flagship institutions of each Art — Royal Opera House, Tate Gallery, Saddlers Wells — have received big Lottery awards for major property developments. Clearly we shall soon run out of house moves and building schemes on this scale for the Arts, begging the question: on what to spend the continuing flood of Lottery money?

The reason for nervousness in the public Arts sector is that it is hard not to notice that the Lottery payouts to the Arts would neatly foot the entire public Arts bill. But this change of funding source would not only introduce

new uncertainties of revenue, it might stir a sleeping dog Joe Public into renewed curiosity about the reason for funding the Arts at all.

Beware the frittering away of fast fortunes on obscure acts or objects of art, coming soon to a gallery near you. Already the rules for Lottery payouts are being adjusted from capital projects to persons. Unlike the funding of athletes, however, where the principle of meritocracy is perfectly quantitative and objective, the funding of art and artists has no such measures of better or best, and is subject to the divergences of taste. If you pump enough state money into athletics there is ample international evidence about how it may be applied to yield increased numbers of Olympic medals. If you pump money into the Arts, what effect does it have? There are those who notice that there is already a vibrant and fully financed market sector arts, and that all you achieve with public Arts promotion is the production of special kinds of art, not better quality art. There are those who notice that what distinguishes state funded Arts from free market arts is a distinction of social symbolism, not of artistic merit. The ticket-buying public offers a vital feedback to nurture and direct popular arts. This is absent in state funded Art, which is free to go off the rails into arbitrary unworthy production.

The temptation to generalise the question of state funding for the Arts is very great. A pattern of distinctly different patronage seems to be accompanied by a pattern of distinctly doubtful Art in contemporary production. But general remarks should be left until last. There is no need to hold a dogmatic belief that all arts subsidy is bad or useless. The outstanding case of Sibelius demonstrates the fruitful potential of state patronage at its best,

but that was a hundred years ago in Finland, and the switch to modernism in the Arts in the twentieth century has made such good patronage much less likely, if not impossible. Try to imagine support for a popular emotional entertainer in painting or sculpture today and you will see what I mean. In any case, each of the Arts is different. The case for or against state funding of the Arts has to be examined as half a dozen separate questions. Each Art must stand on its own merit. For example, there is all the difference in the world between paying trombonists in Bournemouth to perform the classical repertoire and paying a Modern Artist to assemble brick dust in the Tate Gallery.

The division of state funds to the different Arts made at the Arts Council follows an established pattern of portioning the cake. The share for visual Art is a fourth behind Music, Drama and Dance, amounting to a meagre 7%. Yet we should concern ourselves with this 7%. It is all of visual Art, and so if it is wrapped up in pathological nonsense in a systemic moribund way, we should try to understand this, to break its mould, to bring it to book, to disinfect it. For it is not only a question of wasting funds but also, perhaps more seriously, of funding a pernicious education and culture.

If Sarah Lucas is short-listed for the Tate Gallery's Turner Prize next year, the country's most prestigious visual Art award, nobody in artworld UK would be surprised, and many would expect it. Her art is entirely in line with trends at the Tate since 1972. She would be short-listed for rude and simple uses of cucumbers with old chairs and scraps of clothing, and such like. So we have indisputable evidence that visual Art in the public sector is, and has been for decades, completely off the rails: pursuing a barren brand of anti-art and expending thousands of aspirants a year for the inexplicable and extremely slim chance of getting picked for doing something daft. We, the nation, spend somewhere between £50 and £100 million a year propping up the pretence of Modern Art and committing generations of artistically inclined youth to its aesthetic cleansing schemes.

For funding purposes, 'Visual Art' does not include film and video, which are categorised separately, though no less visual and actually more so. 'Visual Art' marks the spot where two old media and methods are rumoured to have died, namely painting and sculpture. Visual Art is a mythology about carrying a magic torch from Piero della Francesca to Jackson Pollock and onwards into the future without end. The Art market, whose revenue depends on the investment potential of material scarcity, has demonstrated that 'works' of modern masters — often objects with little artistry in them — can turn dollars in the same way as old masters. Provenance and reputation can be certified and generated in a college-gallery system. The investors' needs may be very much served by the tendency of Modern Art to pursue the weird and nasty. What the Art market wants is not pictures and patterns but names, a restricted supply of leading names.

The role of the Tate Gallery in promoting the cult of Modern Art to the exclusion of the many other kinds of modern art, and in generating the marketability of select

pranksters as geniuses is as paramount as it is scandalous. It is perhaps vital that there are other state galleries marching to the same tune, giving the impression that Modern Art has an objective validity, and certainly the cult is an international one, and not a home-grown brand of stupidity. But a look at the financial map of State Modernism in Britain leaves one in no doubt about the power and pre-eminence of the Tate Gallery.

The flow of funding is unchecked by any means of quality control. It flows on no matter how absurd, empty or insulting the product. Quite apart from the waste of public money on inscrutable artefacts and inflated collectors' prices, there is the impact on thousands of souls through education and training. Wherever Modern Art is taught, every impulse to pictorial evocation or decorative effect is brain-washed out and replaced with creeds of obscurantism, retention, and gobbledegook. It is for that reason that Art teaching must be added to the bill of State Modernism. The Higher Education Funding Council responsible for this part of the cash flow does not have a figure for Modern Art, only for the combined bill of Art, Design and Performing Arts at £167 million per annum. In my financial map I have therefore made a token estimate of £10 million for this part of the flow. It must be remembered that virtually all artists who succeed in making a living from Modern Art do so from a salaried teaching post. Here is a circular paradox of teaching Modern Art for teaching Modern Art. Notice also that, of the five 'good causes' into which Lottery money is equally divided, three of them fund Modern Art! The figures for cash flows from Millennium Commission and Heritage Lottery Fund are averaged for five and two years, respectively.

So money flows from the public by two ways, tax and Lottery, in what might be called the compulsory and the compulsive payments. If ever this great machine of state Art funding could be linked to popular tastes and common sense it would have to dissolve its entire conception of what art is and break cleanly with its past. When the Tate Gallery opens its giant gallery of Modern Art at Bankside in the year 2000 to mark the Millennium, it will be opening a shrine to the great twentieth century art fake and demonstrating continued absence of intelligent control. Fortunately, the £50 million presently being spent on renovating the defunct power station will not be wasted. The building is to be a large space for public congregation with restaurants and shops. It can easily serve some entirely different purpose from the worship of gallery modernism. But we need to wake up to this nonsense soon, before the continuing floods of public money are turned to purchasing useless art costing fortunes and paying Modern Artists.

SOURCES

The Arts Council of England

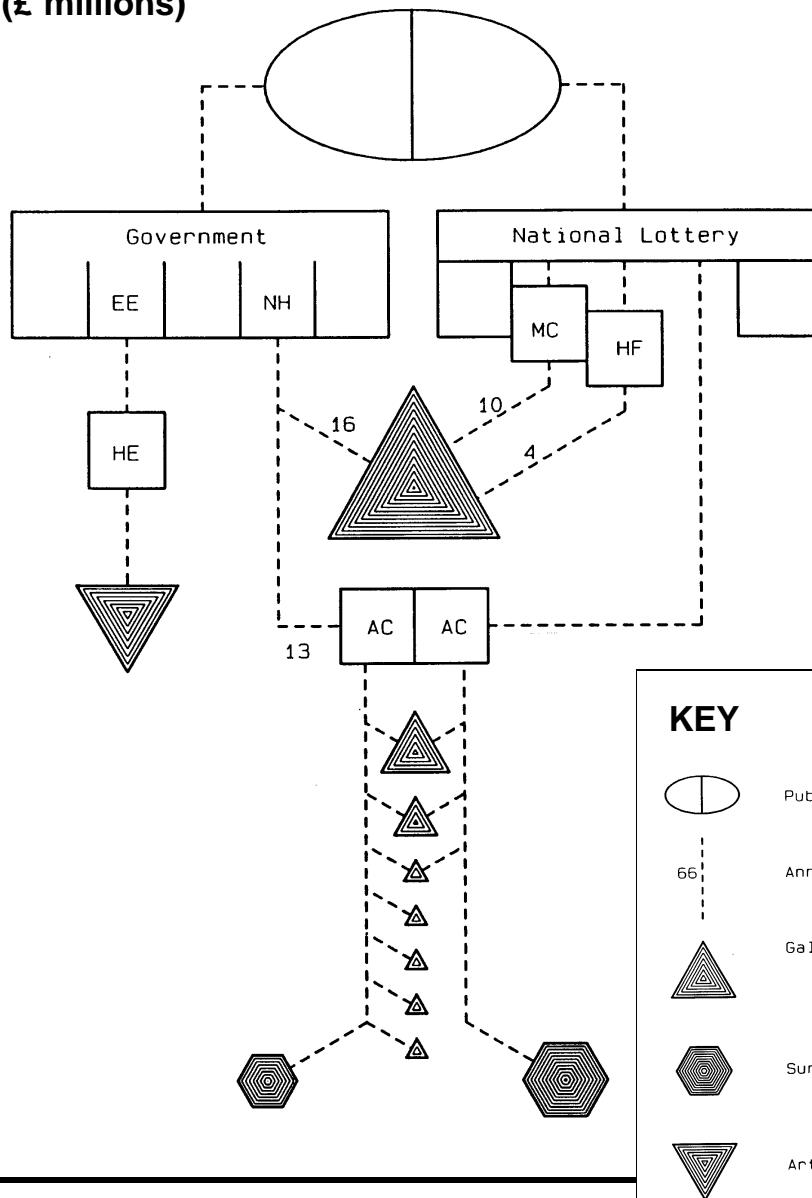
The Heritage Lottery Fund

The Higher Education Funding Council for England

The Millennium Commission

Tate Gallery Report 1992-94

ANNUAL PUBLIC CASH FLOW TO MODERN ART (£ millions)



KEY

	Public cash source (compulsory/compulsive)
	Annual public cash flow (millions)
	Galleries Tate Hayward Serpentine ICA Whitechapel Museum of Modern Art Ikon Arnolfini
	Sundry others
	Art education
AC	Arts Council
EE	Department of Education and Employment
HE	Higher Education Funding Council
HF	Heritage Lottery Fund
MC	Millennium Commission
NH	Department of National Heritage