

The Collector's Eye

**A profile of Gill Hedley for *AI – ArtsIndustry* magazine, 17th Dec 2004
To celebrate *ShowCASE*, the CAS distribution exhibition**

Gill Hedley looks like the kind of head teacher who used to be head girl in the same school, still with youthful enthusiasm but now with the maturity of responsibility qualifying it. Her greying blonde hair is bobbed and brushed tidily behind the ears, she dresses smartly and sensibly and there is minimal make-up.

Hardly the image of the woman who holds our perception of contemporary art in her hands, but that's exactly what as director of the Contemporary Art Society for the last 11 years, she does.

The CAS began as a club of wealthy patrons who felt the public collections ought to include contemporary work. It was created in 1910 after Roger Fry, Ottoline Morrell and D S McColl, the keeper of the Tate, went to an exhibition of Alfred Stevens sculpture, and Fry and Morrell were shocked to hear that the Tate couldn't possibly afford to buy a Stevens for the collection.

"A cup of tea was taken, the conversation got aerated and they resolved that they had to ensure that the national collection had funds, and very quickly other cities said 'what about us?', so it was the Leedeses and the Aberdeens who got it going."

Since then more than 5,000 works of art have been presented to public collections in this country, and there have been salient discoveries among them, such as the Tate's first Henry Moore and Damien Hirst.

But under Hedley's guiding hand it's become much more than a kind of Art Fund for new work, and it's hard to imagine the CAS and its director separately: appearances apart, they seem to define each other.

Born in Gateshead and brought up in Newcastle, where she went to school, Gill Hedley was one of the rare scholars who went straight to the Courtauld Institute as a history of art undergraduate.

There followed temporary jobs in art galleries at Bristol, where her then boyfriend was working, and back home in Newcastle and then Birmingham. Local authority reorganisation in 1974 offered more permanent posts and her first full time job was at the Laing in Newcastle.

"I hadn't any intention of a career in museums. I was seven years at the Laing, looking after the collections, organising exhibitions and failing to get any commitment to contemporary art, and that was starting to irritate me."

So she left for the regional museum with the finest reputation for contemporary art, Southampton Art Gallery.

Among her experiments was to mix traditional art with contemporary work and watch the response, which was that the public made discoveries they weren't anticipating; it was a technique picked up years later by Tate Modern. But after five years, she left Southampton: "I found out that my interest in contemporary art wasn't sufficient to cope with local government" she says laconically.

So she embarked on a new adventure, "the best fun ever", organising contemporary exhibitions for the British Council. The posters of the key shows -the first and the last - during her time there adorn her office walls. The first was Francis Bacon on Moscow, 1988. "It was transcendental, I've never been involved in anything like it, the level of emotion, the hunger for it, was deeply affecting". And moving along the wall, "The last thing was Richard Hamilton at the Venice Biennale, and I'd sort of come full circle.

"Just at that point I got a phone call asking if I'd be interested in applying to the CAS. Not at all, I said."

By then the CAS had got a rather dowdy reputation, very much to do with ladies who lunch, Hedley thought. "It was the image of something that sounded rather 1950s and hadn't reinvented itself. And then the penny dropped, that that was what I was being asked to do."

The society wasn't challenging the collections with really new work, and Hedley changed that. It was the CAS, she claims, that opened eyes to installation and video art, and was the first to encourage art collections to include photographs.

Now the CAS has two kinds of members, the 1,000 or so benefactors committed to bring contemporary arts before the public, and the 100 collections, mostly regional, to which they give paintings.

That operation works in a four year cycle. Each of the member collections pays a £900 subscription and at the end of the cycle the collections pick what they want from the works of art at the CAS.

The latest cycle has ended, and next month at Edinburgh's Talbot Rice Gallery 150 pieces will be on display for the members in **ShowCASE**. The pieces will be on show there until March, when they will be dispersed to the collections for which they have been chosen. Another four year cycle has also come to an end. With £2.5 million from the National Lottery and another £1 million from other resources, Hedley set up a Special Collection Scheme as a culmination of another criterion of hers: helping to educate regional curators in what art is being made and where, now.

"It didn't take much imagination to know that there were curators in Britain who didn't know what was happening in Scotland or London, not just overseas; there was a huge paucity of funds but that wasn't the whole problem.

"Something I was aware of was the big emphasis in the 1980s on a new generation of exhibition curators through *Glory of the Garden*" she says. "The Arts Council did a fantastic job in finding buildings and staff for temporary exhibitions to bring contemporary art to the provinces.

"But I didn't find that very satisfactory, and it seemed that the treatment of curators with respect to collections and for exhibitions was divisive - the implication was any curator involved with an exhibition programme had to travel, anybody in charge of a permanent collection had to stay at home, exponentially becoming more dreary.

"I realised that the implications for collections was rather frightening. They were bound to stay as they were unless the curators in charge were refreshed."

So the scheme enabled curators from 16 permanent collections in England to travel, sometimes abroad, to exhibitions and studios to see what was happening, and make purchases to bring their collections up to date.

"Everything has changed in 11 years," she says, "and the clearest explanation for what has happened is that there was a deliberate move by a small group of people to put art back into a fashionable position. But a generation, a combination of art schools, collectors, museums, made a concerted effort to take on the newspapers and make art news. It happened to be in tandem with the sort of work being produced.

"Works of art being damaged became news, auction prices made front pages. It was Damien Hirst's *Freeze* exhibitions as a result of Michael Craig-Martin's teaching, Charles Saatchi's money and Nicholas Serota's vision and ambition. And we've watched it happen on behalf of our collections."

London Gallery hosts (until The South December 19) ShowCASE, a preview of some of the works of art acquired by the Contemporary Art Society for regional museums and galleries. Among them is Mark Titchner's *We Want Responsibility to be Shared by All* (left). The full preview is at the Talbot Rice Gallery in Edinburgh from January 22.