

# Visual arts: tapping the potential

Research has revealed that there is potential to more than double the market for original art. *Heather Maitland* explores

**R**esearch published by Arts Council England (ACE) last year revealed that there is potential to more than double the market for original art. In *Taste Buds: How to Cultivate the Art Market* (2004), Morris Hargreaves McIntyre found that 12 per cent of residents in England were existing buyers of original art but that 15 per cent aspired to buy but had not yet done so. Research also shows that we could almost double the number of gallery and exhibition attenders. The Scottish Arts Council's (SAC) research *Audiences at Scottish Arts Council Core Funded Visual Arts Organisations* indicated that 43 per cent of the population of Scotland said they would consider visiting an art gallery or exhibition but only 57 per cent of these actually attend.

All of this means that in the United Kingdom there are potentially an extra nine million purchasers of original art and eleven million gallery and exhibition attenders. So how can we tap into this huge potential market for the visual arts?

## Developing sales

Morris Hargreaves McIntyre profiled existing and potential buyers and discovered that they were very similar. So why have potential purchasers not yet bought? They identified three main reasons. First, dealers and artists do not proactively develop the art market because they wrongly assume that it is small and there is no potential for growth. Second, artists and dealers who aspire to operate in the top end of the market can only achieve this by gaining legitimacy for the work – that is recognition from a small circle of curators and critics considered to be experts. This means restricting the amount of work for sale and the number of people who can own it. Third, public sector and artist-led galleries rarely operate as efficient sales outlets.

Although some artists and dealers seem to regard the public as philistines, 19 per cent of the population of England – that's 7.6 million people – are interested in buying art that is contemporary in style. It is not the art itself that is the problem but the way in which it is sold.

Morris Hargreaves McIntyre identified a number of organisations that have developed new retail models to give potential buyers the choice and information they require to actually make a purchase. The public have responded and sales are healthy. An example of this is the *At Home with Art* project which sold 37,000 contemporary art objects through Homebase. The project evaluation by the Susie Fisher Group concluded that a 'genuinely new audience' was introduced to contemporary art because 'a very wide public saw and engaged with these objects by contemporary artists.' You can download a case study at [www.newaudiences.org.uk](http://www.newaudiences.org.uk).

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Among a wide range of recommendations, *Taste Buds* suggests that the market for contemporary art can be developed by helping artists sell more work direct to the public including an increase in the number of open studio events and art fairs; by publishing a guide and developing a website and portal on how to buy art; by widespread marketing of interest-free loans to encourage first-time purchasers (particularly ACE's *Own Art* scheme); and initiating more market development schemes based on particular geographic locations.

## Developing visitors

The Research Practice's report *Results of Research into the Contemporary Visual Arts* (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1992) explores and compares the attitudes of existing and potential attenders.

Existing attenders have a range of responses to contemporary visual art works:

- emotional responses e.g. evoking memories, sensory responses, firing the imagination,
- intellectual responses to what they perceive to be the artists' ideas,
- responses to the originality and impact of the

- work e.g. feeling amazement or wonderment,
- responses to the technical process, the materials used or the surface colours and textures,
- proactive responses – wanting to try to create similar works.

The underlying theme that seemed to link most attenders was recreating themselves or of restoring or enriching their inner selves. Their experiences in galleries were felt to be very private and personal and they were not passive consumers.

The research found that the attitudes of potential attenders were very different. They felt that the contemporary visual arts were:

- the territory of a trendy intellectual elite,
  - difficult to appreciate and unapproachable,
  - dominated by 'experts' who would make them feel small,
  - hyped,
  - irreverent,
  - created by artists who were attacking contemporary values,
  - an effort, not an enjoyable experience or fun.
- They felt the visual arts should be about realism and craft skills. They perceived it in terms of decorative objects rather than a medium for ideas. Without exception, they felt uncomfortable and alienated in a gallery.

ACE's New Audiences website at [www.newaudiences.org.uk](http://www.newaudiences.org.uk) includes reports on a wide range of projects designed to convert potential gallery and exhibition attenders. Many of these projects identified the same barriers to attendance which they seek to overcome.

The most important barrier is the anxiety that even existing attenders feel about going into gallery spaces. Most projects, including those focusing on participation, aimed to create pleasant, unthreatening and social environments in which to learn more about the visual arts. ■



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