

Audio Transcript

Title: The Work of Art | Artist Run Spaces

Summary:

In this episode we'll be finding out more about spaces run by artists – how artists in early 20th century Scotland created opportunities for themselves, and how artist-run spaces and galleries continue to exist today.

Duration: 23:22

Contributors: Jan Patience (arts journalist), Alice Strang (Senior Curator, National Galleries of Scotland), Timothea Armour (artist and committee member, Rhubaba), Sharon Quigley (artist and President, Scottish Society of Artists), and Janie Nicoll (artist and former President, Scottish Artists' Unions).

Transcript

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Jan Patience

I'm arts journalist Jan Patience and you're listening to The Work of Art, a podcast by the National Galleries of Scotland. In this three part series we'll be looking at the issues faced by artists working in Scotland today. From running their own spaces, to funding their own work, and what happens when public opinion is divided?

In this episode we'll be finding out about artist-run galleries and spaces - how they're run today, and how artists in early 20th century Scotland created opportunities for themselves.

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[Background conversation]

Jan Patience

I recently visited the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh with Senior Curator Alice Strang, who spoke to me about 'A New Era, an exhibition which looks at Scottish Modern Art from 1900 to 1950. At the start of my tour Alice showed me a painting that really sums up what the exhibition is all about. That painting is called *Étude de Rhythm* by John Duncan Ferguson

Alice Strang

...that's right, Fergusson's *Étude de Rhythm* to get us started really - proving the point that there was more to modern Scottish art history than the Colourists, and actually there were artists doing work that was really

Jan Patience

...quite out there.

Alice Strang

...pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable.

Jan Patience

Maybe you want to describe this, Alice? Passing the buck!

Alice Strang

Thank you. Well, when I first saw the painting I thought it was a still life, but a male colleague said, 'hang on a minute, just look at it'. And in fact, what I thought was the main flower is a phallus, but it can also be read as, presumably, a male back and buttocks, and coming around them are knees from his sexual partner, and actually what we're seeing is an image of sexual intercourse.

Jan Patience

And this year was, what year was it?

Alice Strang

1910.

Jan Patience

Right, so, sex was invented in 1910.

Alice Strang

And exhibited in public, in Paris, the following year.

Jan Patience

Well, it would be Paris...

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[Music]

Jan Patience

So why was this work exhibited in Paris and not in Scotland?

Alice Strang

Fergusson was, I think, by instinct, anti-establishment, and he moved from Leith to Paris in 1907 for, we think, three primary reasons. One was increasing frustration of the conservatism of the Scottish art world, and he had been mainly been showing his works in London up until that point. Two was an increasing interest in developments in Paris, because he did travel to Paris frequently and was aware of, for example, the work of the Fauves, people like Duran and Matisse, thus christened just in 1905. And the third was a

woman, the American painter Anne Estelle Rice who he met in France the preceding summer and was already based in Paris.

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[Music]

Jan Patience

Ferguson moved to Paris to escape what was then a very staid society in Scotland. In the early nineteenth century women didn't have the right to vote, and the Edinburgh College of Art didn't allow male and female students to attend life classes together. The art scene was conservative, with very small 'c', and opportunities to exhibit and sell provocative work were limited.

But in Paris, Scottish artists like Fergusson and his friend, Samuel Peploe, were in the company of Europe's most revolutionary artists and writers of the time.

Alice Strang

So in Paris from 1907, Fergusson, and then later Peploe when he moved to Paris three years later, became part of a celebrated group of Anglo-American artists and writers known as the Rhythmists, who produced the cutting edge journal *Rhythm*, to celebrate new art and new writing. So Fergusson and Peploe found themselves very easily in a group of equally open-minded creative people. But, for example, Fergusson was elected [unknown], or member, of the salon d'Automne, which was an exhibiting group for these cutting edge artists and he was voted to that position by his peers for his contribution to the modern movement. So in Paris there were half a dozen different salons, official and unofficial, at which you could show your work. So there were opportunities, and presumably a larger audience who had an appetite for the new kind of art that they were producing.

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Fergusson said when he moved to Paris, looking back on those years he described it as, 'Paris was simply a place of freedom'.

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Jan Patience

So the freedom to express themselves in a way that wasn't acceptable back home had a huge influence on the way Scottish artists like Fergusson and Peploe lived and worked. But another important factor in their creative output was the community of artists they were involved with, the support they received, and the spaces where they could exhibit their work. What I'm interested in finding out is, do artist run spaces like these still have an important role to play in the art world today?

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Timothea Armour

My name's Timothea, and I'm part of the committee that runs Rhubaba, which is an artist run gallery and studios in Edinburgh. So we've got studios for about, at the moment I think we've got 21 artists, and a lot of the spaces are shared. We've got over two floors in a building that used to be a workshop and we've built a lot of the space ourselves - the studio partitions. It's quite a fluid space. Everyone has to come through the gallery on their way in and that's the kind of at the centre of the building, and then the studios know on a mezzanine above and underneath around the edge of the gallery. So it may be in the background you can hear some people talking in the studio upstairs. It's not like other studio buildings where everyone's got their own kind of, sort of, closed off private space quite a social building. Being an artist-run space and being volunteers we do have that freedom to be quite experimental.

We've kind of done everything! Well, obviously can never have done everything, but we've done... We do exhibitions, workshops, residencies. We work with writers. We've got a lot of performance. We've had a work in progress shows, filmmaker. We've had reading groups. And they've been a real mix of, kind of, longer and shorter-term projects. One of the ways that we try and prioritise working is having a sort of... We can't we might not be able to offer massive production budgets but what we can offer as a committee is the chance to discuss ideas, and have really long conversations, and try and, sort of, put almost collaborate with the artists that we work with to do something that, you know, they might not have been able to do elsewhere.

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Jan Patience

With budget and time restraints, sharing skills and resources is key for artist-run spaces. While these galleries and studios often develop into supportive networks, there are also a number of other bodies in Scotland which work to support artists individually and collectively.

The Society of Scottish Artists is an artist-led and run organisation open to artists at any stage of their career. I met up with their president, artist Sharon Quigley at their recent annual exhibition in Edinburgh.

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Sharon Quigley

[background conversation] ...long gone are the days when a group of grumpy old men with pipes sat in a line...

The Society of Scottish Artists is a members organisation. It's artist led. It's run by artists for artists. We were established an 1851. We were established very much at the time as a kind of alternative to what at the time was the staid, sort of, Royal Scottish Academy. The idea was very much to promote the work of, at the time, younger artists, though of course now we promote the work of all artists. But I think at the time too it was to, kind of, take an opportunity to pull work in from the rest of Europe and show work of the artists that were kind of inspiring us in Scotland at the time.

Jan Patience

Has it helped you as an artist? You are a practicing artist yourself, you know, do organisations like this help you to, sort of, establish yourself and to push yourself to make new work for events like this?

Sharon Quigley

Yeah, I mean membership of an organisation, an artist-run organisation; I mean there's lots of benefits to it, obviously. There's the peer support that you can get; there's being part of an active network of artists; there's, kind of, being involved, and we do have like hundreds of artists who actually get involved in the process of organising - whether it's through selection, hanging, installation, or volunteering, artists who come forward to help with that process. So that does give you, you know, an amazing insight into I suppose all aspects of exhibitions like this.

I think the last few years artists have had to accept a certain amount of self-reliance and that's where organisations like ours have really come into their own. Our membership has doubled in the last three or four years which is great, you know?

Organisations like this support artists, and make them feel that they're, kind of, able to organise exhibitions, so all of our offsite exhibitions are organised by either co-opted members, the council, or members coming forward with initiatives. And so the role of the council, really, is to support these initiatives. So I suppose it gives people confidence.

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Jan Patience

In the early 20th century a lot of artists-run organisations were not inclusive, which Fergusson found out when he returned to Scotland from France in 1939 at the outbreak of the Second World War.

Alice Strang

It was relatively expensive to be a member of Glasgow Art Club and they didn't accept women members until 1984! And Fergusson was a feminist - his partner was the dance pioneer Margaret Morris, and they deliberately didn't marry because they didn't believe in that as an institution, and at certain points he actually followed her career. He stayed in London in the 1920s because the Margaret Morris movement, and school, and theatre that she'd founded there was doing so well. So when, because of the outbreak of the Second World War, partly inspired by what they had seen and enjoyed in Paris they were amongst the founder members of the New Art Club which became the New Scottish Group and the purpose of those groups were to provide affordable discussion and exhibiting opportunities for everybody. There wasn't this element of selection, there wasn't this element of selection by financial means, and they held eight exhibitions between 1943 and 1956 including at the MacLellan Gallery in Glasgow, and at least one exhibition which toured significantly throughout Scotland. So they did a huge amount to give confidence to struggling artists and to give them a place where they could come together and validate their thoughts and their practice and, most importantly, show their work.

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Jan Patience

In 1946 Fergusson stated his position on the future of art in Scotland.

Alice Strang

'The Scotland I'd like to see, from the art point of view, would be a Scotland liberated from the stranglehold of academic art, and where there was, if not a square deal, at least a fair fighting chance for the independent artist'.

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[Music]

Jan Patience

It's difficult to say whether Scotland today mirrors Fergusson's vision. Opportunities are much more open and inclusive with a certain freedom from academic tradition. But we still rely heavily on formal qualifications and the status of our art schools. So are we really totally free from an academic stranglehold? While Fergusson's hope might not have been an accurate prediction, one thing is certain – there are artist-led organisations and individuals looking out for independent artists.

Janie Nicoll

My name's Janie Nicoll and I'm a visual artist based in Glasgow. I've been involved in the Scottish Artist Union where I was president for three years, and I've also been involved in Engage which is the national organisation for gallery education, and I've also been involved in the Paying Artists campaign which has run through a-n/AIR. And I'm about to do a project for Glasgow International which is GI 2018, and it's called *In Kind* and it's with another artist called Ailie Rutherford and it's a collaboration between the two of us but we really think of it as a kind action-research project, where we're trying to highlight the amount of in-kind labour that's done during GI, or to make, you know, the majority of art festivals happen, where artists do a hell of a lot of work off their own back and, you know, finance projects and exhibitions very much themselves because of the lack of funding.

Jan Patience

Obviously it's a common thread that you find all the time that artists do work for nothing. I mean has that always been the case? I mean we're looking at the *A New Era* exhibition, a lot of the artists there were not known in their lifetime. Maybe we're only finding out about them now because it's hard to hard to make art, to make a living.

Janie Nicoll

I think I think it was really hard then because there was no welfare state, well until after the Second World War, and we have benefits from things like the welfare state and from free university education, which they didn't have prior to that. But I think, yeah, there are still the same sort of fundamental issues of being able to justify your practice. Very much I think if you have children or a family to deal with, especially for women, it's quite a difficult kind of career path that artists kind of travel, you know? There is a lot of precarity, there's no certainty. So you're taking a bit of a risk becoming an artist in a way, I think.

Jan Patience

Tell us about your grandmother. She was an artist during this period of time. What era was...

Janie Nicoll

I think she graduated in 1931, and she was one of the first women to gain a diploma in painting from what was Dundee College of Art, which is now Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art. But I've got some of her paintings and you know they had a very rigorous classical training in painting, and then basically a few years later she married and had five children, and husband died during the Second World War, so she should basically never painted again and her paintings or just ended up in a shed. Yes, it's quite interesting to see them now and just to think about how different expectations, particularly of women, back then were maybe being an artist wasn't really taken seriously as an actual career or something that you could do to earn a living because it must have been really difficult to get established back in those days.

Jan Patience

Do you think it's taken seriously today?

Janie Nicoll

There's sort of misrepresentation of artists within the media. But I think, you know, there's artists doing all sorts of different types of work – they're doing work in hospitals, work with community groups, you know, this is seen as a way of, you know, communities kind of benefiting or sort of enriching the quality of life for people and maybe bringing ideas. So I think the actual role of artists has really changed from, you know, previously probably artists were considered to be either sculptors, or painters, or maybe ceramicists, or jewellers, or very specific things. Whereas now I think that over the last few decades it's become more obvious that artists, I suppose they have to have kind of portfolio careers in a way and their range of abilities has widened so that they can make money from doing all sorts of different kind of jobs. We know that over 80% of the Scottish Artists Union's memberships are self-employed.

We also know that there is a really high number who don't earn more than like £10,000 a year from the practice – they might only earn between like £5-10,000 a year which is way below the average salary or a wage of your average person living in Scotland at the moment. So for the percentage to be 80% self-employed is really high, because in the rest of the general population that would be about 27% or 20%. So a really high percentage of artists are self-employed, and that brings with them all these kind of issues around sickness benefit; not getting maternity pay or holiday pay, all these kind of benefits that you have from the security of actually having a salary. So yeah, I think artists in general are leading quite precarious lifestyles and having to be quite flexible as well.

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Jan Patience

I mean that's part of the sort of, 'can-do' attitude as well, that makes them who they are and as well, and getting together and... running spaces together and having to do everything like this we're talking about *In Kind* – your project - to get people to note down all the hours that they do. If you were running a commercial gallery space it would cost a

lot of money, yet, you know, when you get artists together in a group they're doing that for themselves you know.

Janie Nicoll

Yeah, I mean, I think that... is what makes the sort of the visual arts scene really exciting, is all this... energy that kind of bubbles up. I think it comes from... art students come from the different art schools and art colleges, and come out wanting to do things and then they kind of create their own opportunities.

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Jan Patience

Artists have always led financially precarious lives with expected voluntary or underpaid labour. So how do artists like Timothea cope, especially in the current economic climate?

Timothea Armour

I think now, even more than when I graduated about four years ago, it's getting more difficult to support yourself as an artist. That doesn't mean there's any less people that want to do it as well. I think now, on the committee at the moment, there's more people than ever who have a full time job as well as being on the committee.

We had tutors in college who used to tell you if you wanted to keep... if you wanted to keep on practising as an artist when you graduated you should just go on the dole, which sounds absolutely ludicrous now - you just can't you can't do that. So places like this, we're now more than ever necessary for people to support each other. You know sometimes on their, kind of like, well being and a bit of emotional support. You need to be quite stubborn to carry on, I think.

[Music]

I've had a couple of different jobs whilst I've been on the committee. Most of them have been bartending, and that was something I sort of went into because it meant that I had day times free to make work or work for... work with Rhubaba. But, they are... we've actually got the variety of jobs of people on the committee. We've had florists, a web designer; some people have jobs sort of in arts organisations, a couple of chefs. Do I know any full-time artists? Not personally [laughs].

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Jan Patience

As contemporary artist-led spaces deal with increasing cutbacks, do we need new structures in place to support artists today?

Timothea Armour

At the core of it, the need for a space and like a community that can offer a kind of mutual support - that's not really changed that much. One thing is that a lot of artist-run spaces that exist in Scotland now either started in, sort of, 1980s or very closely based on those models. So... there's a kind of... we're working with an existing precedent like artist-run spaces are established now as something that's integral to the way that the art scene in Scotland, you know, [it] wouldn't exist without them.

But then also I think the circumstances that were operating in, despite sort of trying to use the same model, the circumstances are different, and it's getting harder to... carry on with those models. And there's a lot of discussion at the moment about how we do that. But I think they'll carry on, they're going to carry on existing, but the way that we sort of... the way that we think about what we do with the place, and what we do is probably going to have to change, I think.

One event that we actually had here last summer was with an artist called Emma Hedditch who does a lot of work about co-operatives, and she's almost making a case for artist-run spaces to be run as co-ops, which means that they don't... wouldn't need to look to... outside sources of funding. Because at the moment pretty much all artist-run spaces funded centrally by Creative Scotland and that's - without getting too much into the politics of it - it's going it's getting harder to work with that.

[Music]

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Jan Patience

Next time on *The Work of Art* we'll be talking to artists who have received public funding to create artworks and undertake projects throughout Scotland. We'll be asking, what is the value of publicly funded art, and why is it sometimes so controversial?

I'm Jan Patience. The Work of Art is a three part series brought to you by the National Galleries of Scotland.

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