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ART CONSULTANTS

How do art consultants fit into the larger art world ecosystem? Courtney Kidd looks at some of the pros and cons of the uniquely positioned role.

ESSAY *by* COURTNEY KIDD

RESPONSE

“Art consultants are an integral and important part of the art community,” says Amanda Rowell, who has worked with art consultants since the late 1990s, notably as current director of The Commercial



Amanda Rowell, The Commercial

and prior to that as manager at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney. “They’re integral to the art market ecosystem ... each consultant has a particular style and creates a bridge to a particular group or demographic of collectors, often working in depth

and over a long period with particular collectors and their collections.”

Ongoing communication is the underpinning element in the consultant-client relationship, but how does it actually work? Especially in an environment changing as fast as the art world is, with payments for art works via cryptocurrency now being accepted in auction houses. What kind of questions should the fledgling collector ask of the art consultant who has significant power over guiding their choices? Is it possible to have a one-size-fits-all model of art consultancy when each individual client’s requirements are unique? While some clients may simply not feel confident in acquiring works, others want assistance in obtaining highly sought-after work from overseas artists. Further, an art consultant’s role often crosses over into interior design,

property styling and architecture, yet some would argue that the only art consultants qualified to call themselves such are those who focus solely on providing a full and expansive knowledge of the market.

“With some clients we are lucky enough to start with a blank canvas, however most have an interest in art and works they have already collected. The challenge is to integrate their favourite pieces into an overall room scheme,” says Thomas Hamel, who has been working with top end clients for over 30 years, watching the auction houses and galleries to track what is available. “We bring clients into the studio here at Surry Hills and see which works they respond to, then build from that starting point.”

Manager of STATION Gallery in Melbourne, Samantha Barrow, believes that “a mediator (i.e. art consultant) who acts on a transactional basis is not all that necessary,” and that the gallery can work effectively with the client in procuring art. “When an art consultant is engaged, their primary role is to facilitate and broker acquisitions. The more professional and experienced consultants provide a whole range of services to their clients – including collection management, archiving, installation advice,



Samantha Barrow, STATION

SIBILITY

valuations and, importantly, impartial education through sustained research and knowledgeable curatorial assessment of artists.”

But how does it work financially? Mark Hughes, who operates solely as an art consultant, explains: “The arrangements I have with my clients vary but the one thing that is common across the board is complete transparency around what I earn and who is paying it. It is key to a trusting relationship with longevity.



Mark Hughes,
Mark Hughes Art Advisory

We are usually working on some form of retainer arrangement or a commission-based arrangement, or some combination of both. Where education is required, a lot of time can be spent with the client before any art is bought, and it is important that time be remunerated and the expertise appreciated.”

For an outsider, ascertaining how the industry works financially can be unwieldy. There is no clear structure or system outlining an art consultant’s role or how art consultants engage with clients – unlike, say, a theatrical or sporting contract that is signed between the two parties on the dotted line. The agreement between art consultant and client seems to be more of a Covid-safe “gentleman’s handshake,” the unique point of difference being individual client requirements. Whether working on a fixed percentage or upfront payment, a successful client-consultant model could look similar to that of, say, the commissioning of an art work, where the artist and the commissioner agree upon a payment schedule and a timeline for delivery and installation before work commences.

Annette Larkin has been managing corporate collections for three decades, providing tailored advice across all aspects of purchasing, valuing and collection management. But when it comes to discussing the business side of consulting or specific clients, she holds her cards close to her chest. Some large corporations, it seems, don’t want to be seen to be spending money on art consultancy despite artwork being an important asset. “Assisting a private individual is a very personal relationship, while working with a corporation often involves engagement with a group of executives to develop a collection and agenda for the institution,” Larkin explains. “One may charge an hourly rate or an introductory commission on purchases or a monthly stipend. The two parties have to work out what is best for them, but there is to be no double dipping unless the client is in agreement with this arrangement.”

At Aboriginal & Pacific Art, a gallery in Sydney, Gabriella Roy has grappled with the needs of art consultants, their clients and the artists she represents for over 40 years. Her well-earned reputation is underpinned by an iron clad commitment to discretion. “Of course I want to sell to make money. People come to me because they trust what I do, trust the ethics of the gallery. I don’t hide information about the art and the artists and, like the consultants I work with, I never reveal client details.”

Barbara Flynn is more forthcoming. Perhaps that is because, as an art consultant, she works in commissioning public art and thrives on maintaining the integrity of the project through all its manifestations, particularly enjoying the process of matching artists to sites. Work is undertaken by contract, either provided by herself or by the client. “I avoid use of the cliché term ‘unique,’ but it does describe what I aspire to in every new project. Working with the urban landscape of Sydney as a physical whole is interesting, implementing art that will make the experience of moving around the city fascinating and meaningful.”

For art consultant and former lawyer Alana Kushnir, her consultancy role is one of “confidant, facilitator and educator,” as she describes it. “The art market has its own way of operating, unique to any other industry. It pivots on trust and relationships, and building that between those producing, selling and buying art is crucial.”

Keen to remove art world mystique, Kushnir set up Guest Work Agency, a company that functions as an advisory platform and membership network for art collectors. One of its biggest challenges has been to work around Covid-19. “Galleries have counted on receiving a large share of their revenue from art fairs. The closures, cancellations and postponement of these events have presented a huge loss for the art world in 2020. We’re creating new avenues for prospective buyers to engage with galleries and artists, to empower the next generation of art supporters.”



Alana Kushnir,
Guest Work Agency

Kushnir believes that contextual knowledge of art enables stronger strategic purchasing decisions. Guest Club’s three tier structure – Art Lover, Art Supporter and Art Collector – offers tailored advice and education designed to peel back the mystique of the art world. The top tier, Art Collector, offers a full service of art recommendations, right through to collection strategy direction and collection inventory management.

It’s a hybrid consultancy, one providing in-person and virtual events enabling the kind of art world engagement that can still nod to a little air kissing and a glass of vino. It is one of the many styles of consultancy awaiting the client who, it seems, holds the aces when it comes to negotiating the heady terrain of buying art. **V**

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