

## THE POWER COLLECTION.

Donald Brook. (CAS Broadsheet, April 1972)

I believe that the Power Collection has started badly and that there is no reason to think it will improve without a radical change in policy. This note is intended to set out as simply and clearly as possible what seems to me to be wrong to propose an alternative policy and to invite discussion.

There are obstacles to clear communication on this topic. One of them, that it is not easy to ignore is the tendency for differences of opinion on questions in which values press harder than facts to deteriorate into merely personal and sometimes even spiteful exchanges. A recent attempt of mine to initiate discussion led, so far as I know, to only a single response in print. Mr. Patrick McCaughey, in *The Age* (29th January 1972) and the *Broadsheet* (March 1972) took up the issue. He addressed himself to the arguments in only the most perfunctory way his purpose being to settle the matter out of hand by reference to individuals and their qualities. The present policy he attributed to Professor Bernard Smith, who is 'the ablest art historian Australia has ever produced' and to Mr. Elwyn Lynn, who is a connoisseur critic of wide experience in the art world'. These two colleagues of mine, he asserted are 'ambitious for a more solid achievement' than I am, and are evidently therefore right, while I am unqualified, 'inexperienced in the art game', fervent, gullible, naive, and logic-chopping and therefore, by implication, wrong. My colleagues, of course, cannot be held responsible for their eager young apologist's innocence of the forms of valid argument and I expect that they will deplore debate at this level and in this spirit as much as I do.

A second difficulty I have found is that my own view, although simple enough is oddly opaque to comprehension and easily misunderstood or misrepresented. I do not know why this is so, but it is so: constantly I hear that whereas the official policy for the Power Collection is to fill it with admirable works of art, it is my paltry alternative proposal that it should be made a representative collection and – by implication – an aesthetically inferior collection. This not my view, as I hope to show. However I should make one more comment by way of preamble.

It is this: I have noticed a recent willingness on the part of the Power Curator to engage in public debate about his policy - for example, in reply to Mr Bernard Boles' criticism of the 1972 exhibition held in Melbourne (*Letters: The Review* Feb. 26 1972). This is most encouraging, for it had seemed that dialogue was impossible. The Curator's response to the suggestion that the policy of the Power Collection might be a topic for discussion by the staff of the Power Institute has been to reply (no doubt truthfully) that his terms of appointment with Sydney University give him the right to build the collection as he personally decides and to decline consultation with other members of staff if he so chooses. The Director of the Power Institute who is understood to have retained some proportion of the buying rights himself, has not intervened. The Curator's willingness to enter a more public forum of discussion is therefore to be commended.

I should like to say at once that unlike some critics of the Power Collection I have no complaint about the present Curator's taste, and do not believe that any other individual following the same policy would do better. Our present Curator is a person of knowledge and sensibility who has, I am convinced chosen many good things of their kind within a very severely restricted budget. This point has already generated much misunderstanding and some ill-feeling. When I made it once before, in relation to the first curator (Mr Gordon Thompson) his successor-to-be wrote that I was unreasonably attributing infallibility to him. I now hope to make the same point again in relation to Mr Lynn without provoking the same misunderstanding. It is the policy and its underlying assumptions, not the person that needs revision.

The faults and virtues of one-man collecting are almost inextricably linked. A man of definite taste will have firm convictions; a man who consults too readily with his colleagues about what he should do may have no mind of his own; a man who genuinely admires one thing or one kind of thing must genuinely despise another. It is almost inevitable that a curator of taste will be driven, as Mr. Lynn has been, by the sincerity of his convictions, to condemn half a dozen of the most recent manifestations of art as 'just rubbish'. More pertinently he must follow through the implications of his judgement in his buying, if he is to act consistently with the advertised policy that he will buy only what he considers to be admirable.

We are impossibly tested in dealing with the most recent art, to say which of it is good and which is not. It is an art critic's task among other things, to make up his mind and to argue for what he believes to be admirable - and to argue, as well, against what he believes to be bad, ephemeral or meretricious. Only time we believe (with reservations) will tell. And here's the rub from the point of view of the Power Collection: by the time the artistic reputations are made and the conflicts of contemporary taste resolved into a coherent history the prices are too high. Even if they were not we should still be enjoined by the terms of our bequest to stay close to the growing points of art.

It seems to me that the simple and correct way to handle our dilemma is to buy the most recent works not on a representative basis in the ordinary sense, but on the basis that each work is thought to be genuinely excellent by some qualified person. I have in mind indeed, a great many qualified persons -- one to recommend each work. Representation, in as much as it occurs, will be the representation of all the shades of expert contemporary opinion; it will not except by accident be representative of all kinds of art there are with the issue of excellence ignored or relegated to a minor roll.

On such a basis we should, as a matter of reasonable inference, net a few of the big fish; and we should get a bonus. In retrospect we should not only be able to see and study in our own collection, what course the history of art actually took among the available paths, but also how it took that course--what the options were and how and (perhaps) why they came to be made as they were.

The curator's task of purchasing should be carried out mainly at his desk. He should write to some dozens or hundreds of experts and leading enthusiasts of contemporary art all over the world, and invite each of them as money becomes available to select one work for us and - most importantly - to tell us why that work seems to him to be admirable and to be a contender for a place in the history of art. Up to the limit of

financial capability we should take this advice however surprising it may be to us, or however alien to our own taste.

The selection of qualified people should not present a great problem since conspicuous expertise in effect nominates itself. They will be leading art critics, museum directors teachers and writers on contemporary art - indeed they should include a great many artists. It would be most interesting to learn what Oldenburg would nominate for us or Richard Hamilton or Joseph Beuys and to learn their reasons.

That some of these partisans of different standards of taste will misjudge the future course of art history is inevitable. Indeed the form of their commission is not that they should show prescience but that they should urge an aesthetic preference: it is open to anyone to argue that he has chosen rightly and that the judgement of history is crass or not yet clearly fulfilled. It should not be forgotten that the performance of a single individual (say the present curator) is subject to the same contingencies and that there is no a priori reason to think he must be more successful than a hundred men of taste would be.

The advantage of my proposal is not that the rate of success in picking winners must be better (although it may be) but that the mistakes of a great many experts will be intrinsically interesting, and illuminating about the dynamics of tastemaking and art history, whereas the 'mistakes' of an individual will be illuminating only about him.

There is another consideration that is, I think, properly seen as subsidiary but not as negligible. The Power Collection has more than one function and one of its functions is that of a teaching instrument.

The fact that the bulk of the collection has not been made explicitly to represent current events in the visual arts may well result in gaps that must somehow be filled - and I do not mean anyhow by somehow. Some of the proportion of the fund perhaps quite a small proportion, should be set aside for disposal by the teaching staff of the Power Institute including, of course, its Curator. Again, nothing should be bought that is not thought to be admirable by those responsible for the purchase, but the pursuit of excellence alone, without thought of the uses to which the collection must be put, is unsubtle if not actually irresponsible. Neither is it generous to suppose that members of the staff of the Power Institute of Fine Arts are inexpert, or have no taste, merely because they have a duty to teach.

I do not know of any collection that has been made, or is being made on the principles that I recommend. The magnetic attraction of one or the other of two bad models seems to stand in the way of it. One of the is the grandiose model of the great individual connoisseur - collector - the Berenson or the Duveen model - and the other is the model of the democratic committee that expresses, in the end a highest common factor of several tastes. Curators always want to be Berensons, and trustees always want to form a committee to stop him. I recommend that we operate with neither model.

There are practical difficulties in the detail of my proposal and it would be constructive to move forward to a discussion of them. First, however, it is necessary

to have the proposal seriously entertained. Since I think that it is arguably superior to the alternatives, and in particular to the de facto policy I believe that we are entitled to hear the contrary argued by those who disagree with me. Nobody so far as I know, has gone into print with an account, much less a justification of the Power Institute's present buying policy in relation to other possible strategies.