



## **Keynote: Visions for the future: a key part of society**

Kate Brindley, Director – mima (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art)

### **Introduction**

It gives me huge pleasure to introduce Kate Brindley. Kate has nearly twenty years of experience in the visual arts and museums sector with particular experience working in twentieth century art collections and capital developments including being head of arts and museums for Wolverhampton and director of museums, galleries and archives for Bristol City Council, leading the South West *Renaissance in the Regions* programme and she has now been director at mima since July 2009. Her achievements in this time have been staggering so I'm looking forward to hearing all about it.

### **Visions for the future: a key part of society**

This is my first visit to the AMA conference and I'm delighted to be here, particularly delighted because it is the Sheffield City Hall and I'm a Sheffield girl. I spent my teenage years coming to concerts in the City Hall so thank you to the AMA of fulfilling my dream of actually being on the stage instead of in the audience screaming!

Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (mima) is in Middlesbrough which is in the Tees Valley – about an hour's drive time from Leeds, York and Newcastle. It has no cities, it is a region of towns; Hartlepool, Stockton, Darlington, Redcar and Middlesbrough. We're the only National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) in Middlesbrough



which has a population of about 130,000 people and the whole of the Tees Valley has around one million people. We opened in 2007 and we were one of the wave of new art galleries in the UK.

£16 million was made available for us by Arts Council England and European Regeneration money. We were led by the Local Authority as a regeneration project for the town and in quite a short time we've had quite an impact. Considering our audience which, as marketers, I know you'll understand me when I say that we are very high on 'a match and a pint' and quite a few of them are visitors, partly on the way to visit a match. Quite a few season ticket holders at Middlesbrough

do come through our doors. It has been a project driven by the Local Authority and it was really to establish an arts institution of the calibre and international profile which both Middlesbrough and the Tees Valley have not had on such scale or of such quality before.

The region has very little arts infrastructure. It has no concert hall, no theatre of any scale, very local facilities. It is a region with high poverty and very high unemployment and very low life expectancy – where the art gallery is based, the average life expectancy is 54 year's old. So, it was quite a risk to put an international contemporary art gallery in an area with such challenges. I'm going to tell you a little bit about our organisation to date and I hope that it will give you some encouragement, some ideas and some hope. Just to mention, I'm not the founding director of the organisation and can't therefore make claim to that. I inherited the organisation when it was just two year's old and still exhausted from the phenomenal opening but was just crawling as an institution so I'll tell you a little bit about our journey. The areas that I'll cover are our purpose, our product, working with artists, working with audiences, our staff, what it is to be 'civic' in Middlesbrough, and a little bit about how we are going to change in the future.

The art gallery was working to quite a traditional model and in some ways that's not surprising because when you set out on building a new institution you refer to what already exists. What I say to a lot of people and what I talk about with the staff is that we are still learning about what it means to run an international contemporary art gallery in Middlesbrough. And, what it is like to do it on that scale. It is interesting that the gallery didn't just land out of space as some people think it has. It came out of 50 years of the people of Middlesbrough wanting their own art gallery and we've got the archives to prove that – where people have said that they are working towards a new art gallery dating back to around 1954. It came out of a lot of faith from the people of Middlesbrough. We don't have all the answers to what it is to run an international contemporary art gallery in Middlesbrough but we are a group of professionals who want to encourage and to work with our community to look at what that might mean. We know that means listening, participation and being really responsive to our communities. As you've heard from other speakers, and it's great that it has been such a strong theme; we know that it's not just about delivering a product. It is about creating really meaningful experiences and it is about relationships. We also know that takes a lot of time. As a director I've had many different directorial roles but this one I've found both incredible challenging and rewarding in equal measure. My role has been so much about relationships and facilitating conversations with my staff, my customers, our stakeholders, the partners and artists we work with and also our funders. It has been really testing. An image that

someone gave to me – and it's not a new one but is worth remembering, is that we're all used to these hierarchies of the triangle with the director on the top and everyone else making up the triangle. But actually, what I like to see is that I'm at the bottom of the triangle and it is inverted and that I'm there to help facilitate the conversations. I'm also there to help us stay accountable to our customers as well which I still think is a really important part of my role.

### **Let's start with the *product***

Our artistic product starts with our collections. We are a collecting organisation and the collection is at the very heart of what we do and that's a really important thing for a museum and important for a contemporary art museum. It has been really clear that that is important, that it is at the centre and that it is the starting point for everything. It was really interesting and became clear to me quite quickly how important collections are to our audience and that was about listening to them and understanding about how important these collections were – the collections that the people of Middlesbrough own, that they had donated and fundraised for since the 1950s. And so it was really important to make these collections available and visible. One part of that was the Archive and making visible the story of collections visible is also a really important part of connecting our audiences back to us. So that when they say to us 'why are you here' and 'what do you mean to us', actually part of the collections and the stories hold are one of the ways of building a bridge back to them. Letting the people have a voice and interpreting the collections has also been a part of that theme.

Working with international artists is also at the core of what we do and we've worked with some of the best artists in the world; Jannis Kounellis, Gerard Richter and now Alex Katz. That is really exciting because mima is of the quality that it is we are able to bring artists to Middlesbrough and people really appreciate that. Equally as important are local artists. It's always a bit of a 'sticky one' when you run an international art gallery to say how you work with local artists and so I held a public meeting very soon into my directorship. It was one of those meetings where I thought I've got to have big shoulders because it was a public meeting and I asked them to tell me about how they felt things were going after two years of having mima. As I expected, I had a lot of shouting local artists. We've worked hard in the last four years to work with local artists and they are a really crucial part of our audience and I think we've got a responsibility towards them in a place like Teesside. So we've worked on an active programme to support local and regional artists. From working with a local studio group to having a programme of bursaries and running something called; *Emerging Creators* where we work with artists and creatives to curate projects in the

community. This is a key relationship for us and it was really important for me to turn that crowd of shouting people into people that were going to advocate for us and now I think that they are.

Driven by my belief it is only through this active dialogue and active participation with audiences that we can really be embraced by our communities and that we will win their trust. It really has taken a lot of time and commitment – we were the new institution on the block, occupying the middle of *their* town – so we needed to build trust. And it's really important in building trust that you let people have a say, that their voices are heard and also that you meet some of their needs. One of the ways we've don't this is by running workshops about skills.

People are really interested in learning how to draw and we are a Centre of Excellence for Drawing – we collect drawing and promote drawing as a fundamental part of our practice. Every week we run drawing classes which you may think is an old fashioned thing for an international art gallery to do but it is something that community wants and loves. We try to do it in a different way and (image) opposite is one of our life drawing classes 'with a twist'.



A key strand of what we do is working with young people. Our audiences are actually quite young and I think that in some ways, young people find us easier to relate to. We work with young people in a way that really is about looking at how we share authority and how we work with young people for their voices to be present in what we do. We run a group called *mima dreamers* and they do talks and tours for us, curate shows and write interpretations. Another part of sharing authority is around how we use our collections.

We have a jewellery collection which is of international importance and we created a project called *Wear mima* where we actually let people wear the jewellery from the collections – under supervision. It was filmed and it was great to see a whole group of people wearing our jewellery collection and telling us what they thought about that and how it made them *feel*. It was giving a very different approach to interpreting collections – less about the authority and more about the feeling and how people felt about these objects.



We've also had our first artist in residence as another strand of what we do is facilitating those dialogues between audiences and artists. It's a real privilege when you are the director of an organisation or a curator or working in the marketing department to actually work with artists and we want to share that with others. Our artist in residence has worked across the communities in Middlesbrough in a really in depth way and will be creating a new work for us. Another strand that we focus on is 'staff'. If you want things to change, you want to be trusted and if you want to instil a listening and learning environment in your community then it has to start internally in your organisation. It starts right at the heart; do you listen to each other? Do you learn together? Do you trust each other? Are you professional and committed? We had some work to do in that area so we've spent the last 18 months or so doing a really in-depth development programme with the staff and that has really taught us a lot. It has really given my staff complete empowerment within their roles. Most of the staff are local, they're the community, and it is really important that they feel empowered and to love what they do. So after spending this amount of time – and it has been a real commitment from the staff at all levels, including volunteers and casuals, not just permanent staff – we've now got a staff team who are very motivated and that's where the ideas are starting to come from. We developed a Challenge Fund for staff so that they can make try things and make things happen with a little financial support from the gallery.

### **Being civic**

A key theme for me and one that I'd like to emphasise is our role as being 'in the civic' and this is a big part of our brand. We can't be 'other' in our community; we have to be a part of it and that's part of the challenge that we've had as a team. We're a civic venue. There's very little infrastructure in Middlesbrough and we're the biggest, shiniest, most beautiful building that has ever been in Middlesbrough. We are a beautiful impressive space and people come in and say 'wow, look at this', 'can we come in here?', 'this is amazing'. And so it is crucial that we are as generous as possible with this space because it is a huge privilege for us to work there. It is an essential part of our value that we have many 'doors' to people and that's how we like to use the building – in a generous and collaborative way. I say to people that we need to 'host' and be hospitable. Don't say 'no', say 'yes'. So when the local retail consortium came to me and asked to use the galleries for a fashion show to promote our shopping culture in Middlesbrough and the fact that retail has gone down terribly leaving us with lots of empty shops, I said 'yes' and they completely transformed the galleries. We've also held parties in our foyer and when the Olympic Torch came through Middlesbrough we were the venue where everybody was and similarly, we've just had the Mela where we opened our doors and let everybody use the venue and be a part of that.

A programme that one of my team wanted to run has taken on a whole new life. It is called *mima live* and was started by someone in the front of house team who is a musician who pointed out that while there is a strong music scene in Middlesbrough it is very pub orientated and we don't really have any venues in which to play. They were looking for a different sort of environment in which to perform and to collaborate with artists. I said OK, let's try it and see how it works and they started running gigs in the foyer and in the garden at mima. They took on a life of their own and a whole new bunch of people started coming into to mima. We now have a grant to promote new music events and are curating a whole series of music events this autumn.

Part of the civic is having a societal role. What value can your organisation be in the society that you are in, your particular contacts, your particular civic need? I think that you should be part of the solution and not part of a problem and this is about changing the narrative. Regularly in our local newspaper we are seen as the big drain on finances – the Local Authority give us £800,000 per year and that's a lot of money in Middlesbrough. People wonder what it is we are doing for £800,000 per year so it is really important that we are part of the solution and that we actually answer some of the societal needs. Youth unemployment is a big issue in Middlesbrough so we have a programme of Creative Apprentices that we employ and we will be looking to employ more in the future. Working with the health agenda in Middlesbrough is a really big deal so again it is looking at how we work with that ... bringing occupational health students into work with us or working with groups of mental health patients which is something we are doing at the moment. It is about using your assets, whether that's your building, your collection or your staff to be a part of the solution.

### **The future**

We're definitely on a journey and we're not there yet. We have to balance being an international art gallery and all that means, our artistic credibility in an art world that can often be harsh and fickle, along with all the needs of the collections and also with working in our particular context. This takes a lot of confidence and sharing of authority. You can't just open a place like mima, in Teesside, and simply expect people to come in and enjoy it. It's not a passive process. It is consultative and it is about listening and we have to look very hard at what we do to continue to do that every day. We also know that there's an economic reality; we're still part of the local authority and I answer to the Head of Communities. Our purpose as an art gallery in the particular context is under pressure from the economic realities and so we have to look at what we do in the future to continue to be vibrant and not just survive but to thrive in the next era. We are talking with our ambitious local university; Teesside University, who share a similar mission to us by wanting to be

deeply rooted but international like we do. We are looking at how we might merge with the university in the next few years so that we align our agendas. Universities are increasingly becoming the civic leaders as local authority power diminishes and becomes less important. They are big employers and draw hugely on their local population and they are increasingly interested in public impacts. They are powerful brands too and for us this is part of our future.

I started by saying, I hope, that mima is a special place and a very new member of staff said to me; 'it kind of gets under your skin doesn't it?' It is special and not just because it is glass and concrete and it is beautiful but because it's got personality and spirit. And it is the people that work there and the people that interact with it, the artists and communities, that really make it. And that's why I'm hopeful for our next six years.