

ARTFCITY

The Difference Between Art Consulting and Private Dealing

by PADDY JOHNSON on JUNE 19, 2014 · 0 COMMENTS

INTERVIEW + WHAT'S AN ART CONSULTANT?

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Kevin Moore

I've been covering the art industry for nine years, and I still don't feel like I have a clear grasp on what an art consultant does. What's the difference between a dealer and an art consultant? Who are they? What's their day to day like? So I asked a few private dealers, consultants and curators to talk about what they do. Everyone told me a different story.

Today's conversation with independent curator and writer [Kevin Moore](#) is the most recent interview in the series we call, "[What's an Art Consultant?](#)" Moore has been advising collectors for over ten years and more recently curating gallery shows. He has a Ph.D in art history from Princeton University and is currently the Artistic Director and Curator of FOTOFOCUS, Cincinnati.

So you're an art consultant. What does this mean?

Kevin Moore: This is way I make most of my money, and it's what I really like doing...I feel like there are lots of people running around calling themselves art advisors who are really doing something else. They're really just working as auxiliary staff for galleries, or they're just private dealers.

When I emailed you initially, you used the term operator to describe some art consultants. What is an operator?

KM: Anyone can be an operator. It's just specific to the art world...people who are looking for business opportunities. I think there's an idea in American business that you just sort of do whatever you can get away with. And people like to say that the art world isn't regulated, and I guess that's true— although it is kind of self-regulating, and I suppose this goes on in other branches of business too. I'm just not that familiar with how marketing and other industries work.

To be clear though, I think that anyone calling themselves an "art consultant" or "advisor" should only be paid by the collector. That's the only way that they can remain ethical and neutral and keep their collectors in mind. I mean, I tell my collectors not to buy things as often as I tell them to buy things, because it's my job to distinguish between what is good and what is bad and what is overpriced and what is something not as it should be and what is something really to go after. Without that neutrality, people are just working for themselves and other people as an extension of what those galleries already do.

If you buy a house or an apartment, you always sign a document stating that you understand that the real estate agent represents the seller—not you. And I think something like that could and should happen for consultant. If you work for a collector, advising them, they need your honest advice.

Yes. No other self-respecting art consultant I know, no other person I admire and think of as a legitimate colleague, none of those people take money from galleries.

For a lot of people, it feels like a free for all.

What distinguishes you from other curators who assemble private collections?

I'm unusual. I have a PhD from Princeton, but that doesn't make me a better advisor. It makes me more knowledgeable and maybe have a longer point of view because of my critical judgement.

I've only recently started curating gallery shows. I've only recently started curating gallery shows, although ten years ago I was on track to work in the museum world. I like curating gallery shows a lot because they have a kind of open endedness; museum exhibitions tend to be authoritative. Gallery shows are a kind of quick, experimental thing, and I think of them as temporary collections. In my mind, there's some imaginary collector, and we're putting together an imaginary collection for them, based on some sort of imaginary idea of what that person likes. It doesn't gain me consulting reputation; collectors who look at my shows don't necessarily conclude that they want to work with me on their collection. But for me, it's the same exercise. I do it because I like the creative process.

I don't have as much control over the private collections— I will say that. I'm not given carte blanche in terms of choices. It's really more about helping them. I'm there as an applause-o-meter, and for the connections, and I have and I just try to smarten it up and point them in the right direction and make sure they don't make any big mistakes financially. That's how that works.

The people I work with are all very smart. I don't feel like I'm that far out there in front of them. But they're people who already have a good idea of what they want. I just help fill in the gaps and reassure them, or turn them in a different direction if I think they're really walking off a cliff.

Is that a hard conversation?

More just about giving them a better choice. Over the years you work with someone...jokey. I do let them know if you think something is mediocre. They know I don't like certain artists, and it's not my job to ruin anyone's fun. I've changed my mind on certain artists.

Like who?

Certain collectors have really liked artists, such as Ryan McGinley for example— it's part of understanding what you like, versus what collector A or B likes. I tend to like over-the-top romantic, a bit cerebral, formerly-lush works. One of my clients really likes pop culture, no big idea, even trashy things. I've grown to embrace Ryan McGinley, because we've found really great things, and in fact of curated him in shows. Sometimes it's just finding an edge of an artist's work that you can enter that you like, and slowing growing to understand the whole thing better.

We all make snap judgements because we see so much art. If we spent all the time that artists needed, we wouldn't sleep at night. So, I'm trying to get myself trying to slow down. And sometimes conversations do that; a gallerist, a collector, someone sitting with me at dinner will get me to change my mind about [a piece]. We all change our minds, all the time, based on someone who has a smart perspective—and I think that's a good, healthy thing.

So when you go to an art fair, how to do you find art?

I look at the previews. Typically I have three or four pieces in my head, and I might hit those galleries first, and maybe put a hold on them or buy them...I tend to follow certain galleries. Certain galleries you really respect. I'm always looking for new galleries to add to that list. Hitting the galleries the most. Especially in the world of photography. Usually I come home with 5-6 new contacts.

You go to the same fair multiple times over the week? You are a repeat fair visitor!

Yes, and you start to see a lot of the same stuff, especially in the photography world. I mean, they don't have that much merchandise to bring out, if the gallery does three or four fairs in a row, in a span of five months. You're looking at a lot of the same stuff.

What's the primary way you get new clients? Or are you even looking for new ones?

I'm always interested in working with someone good, who's serious. I have to say, they always come to me. It's often through someone who already works with me or some sort of recommendation. I don't do anything to find collectors, they find me, strictly speaking. I guess I've been doing this for 12 years now, so I have enough of a reputation that anyone interested in photography will hear my name.

I think I'm a bit unusual with my education, and that probably scares some people off. People respect the background I have, that I don't come from galleries or auction houses. A lot of this has to do with how finance-minded I am. It's one more game that you can play. And then other collectors who say they just don't care about the investment aspect of collecting. But of course, they do in some sense. I mean, nobody wants to waste their time or waste their money on art that's not going to hold their value. So it's always a part of what we do, even if we don't talk about it that often. Certain collectors just don't even... won't even talk about prices. Sometimes I'll just throw it in like a caveat: "I know you don't like to talk about this, but this piece is made by a very good artist whose career is on the rise—that's just one advantage to keep in mind." But really, for those people, it just comes down to loving the work or not. And I think some more financially-minded collectors find more financially-minded advisors. And some who are more interested in the collection and the ideas it generates might be more inclined to find someone like me, but we're kind of doing the same thing anyway. It's just a question of perception and emphasis.

In the reports I create, there can be a long section that's market history. If that's the kind of conversation those people want, and indeed if it's that kind of picture, a complicated vintage photograph for example, it requires that kind of analysis. It's hard to say about what a vintage photography by Man Ray is really worth, and there can be a lot of difference of opinion about that. So, yeah, even if with a non-financially minded collector, if we're looking at a very expensive picture, especially if it's a vintage picture, it does require that kind of thing whether they like talking about it or not. It's an essential part of the conversation because the price depends on the condition of the print, the rarity of the print, all kinds of different things. It becomes very much about connoisseurship when you're talking about vintage photography.

How do you define connoisseurship?

Connoisseurship has to do with the subjective elements there. How important is this artist, how important is this image? How important is this provenance? The market stuff is the one way you can rationalize the value, but even there, there's a lot of room for debate. Modernist photography sky rocketed in value in the last 10 years. When does a print of Man Ray's blanche, when does that become worth 800,000 vs 60k? It's a question of analyzing the ascent of the market, but also, always keeping in mind the importance of the image, rarity of it, print history. There are always these historical, critical questions that I would call connoisseurship.

Who are the people who do what you do, who you really respect?

Gabe and Andy [\[Ruth|Catone\]](#). They do an honest and valuable service. [Mary Hoeveler](#). [Candace Worth](#).

We don't feel competitive. We all respect that we do things in a similar way and we've had conversations over the years of trying to start some sort of consortium that would identify some sort of standards for art consulting. At the end of the day, you really have to be looking out for the collector.