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The future of the Art Fund's volunteers

One of the happiest aspects of the work of charities involved with the art world is the participation of volunteers. Take, for example, the Portable Antiquities Scheme. Founded in 1997 as a result of the Treasure Act 1996, it invites members of the public to report archaeological discoveries to one of forty local Finds Liaison Officers. The scheme could not function without the teams of trained volunteers who record the finds. Such work, which is of national importance, is not exceptional. In 2017–18, for example, the National Trust had 61,000 volunteers, who gave almost five million hours to the organisation in five hundred roles.

The significance of the contribution made by volunteers is evident in the way that most organisations now have a rigorous approach to recruiting and using them, emphasising the expectations that each has of the other, not least that volunteers will be properly managed, just as paid staff expect to be. Good management of volunteers requires proper consultation before instituting changes to roles or work practices. An example of how an eminent organisation with a long tradition of volunteering can get this seriously wrong is provided by recent events at the Art Fund. Founded in 1903 as the National Art Collections Fund, it is an independent charity that has as its main focus raising money to help museums in the United Kingdom make acquisitions. According to its most recent annual report, in 2017 the Art Fund gave grants totalling £5.5m to help ninety-four organisations acquire more than two hundred works of art and other objects. The Art Fund makes a very significant impact across the country: in 2017 some eighty per cent of its grants were to organisations outside London.

This emphasis on support for the regions has been underpinned since the 1960s by the Art Fund's network of local fundraising committees. Consisting entirely of volunteers, these committees organise events including lectures, visits to country houses and other outings, the profits from which are given to the Art Fund. There are fifty-seven such committees across the country, organised into regional groups, the chairs of which meet twice a year at the Art Fund's London headquarters. At the most recent meeting, in October, they were given some startling news by the Director of the Art Fund, Stephen Deuchar: at the end of 2020 the committees were to be disbanded. Instead, he announced, the Art Fund's trustees had decided that the existing volunteers would be encouraged to work directly with museums and art galleries, organising fundraising events on their behalf. Deuchar followed this with an article in the winter issue of the Art Fund's magazine, *Art Quarterly*.¹ After drawing attention to the way that as well as supplying a substantial annual revenue the volunteer committees have raised exceptional sums for special appeals, Deuchar delivers his news: 'our future vision for participation (which we plan to hone in 2019 and implement from 2020) will mean that the national structure of Art Fund local volunteer committees will come to a natural end'.

Passing over the description of the committees coming to their 'natural end', when in fact they have been ended by executive fiat, this raises several questions. Why was there no consultation with the committees in advance of this decision? Why was the announcement made before a fully worked-out alternative to their work had been decided upon? And, crucially, what are the motives for the decision? The only reason given in the article is that participatory opportunities are now better organised by means of 'digital and other media', but that does not explain why a system that is working well needs to be closed down. Deuchar also fails to acknowledge that the volunteer fundraising programmes function as much-appreciated educational activities in regions where, in many cases, few such opportunities exist. He has in addition been quoted in an article in the *Times* as saying that there are problems with 'recent data protection legislation, legal compliance issues and the difficulty of ongoing volunteer recruitment'.² This is puzzling: the Art Fund is surely just as capable as any other charity with a volunteer body in dealing with the demands of data-protection legislation. The issue of recruitment largely relates to the problems some committees have had in finding new chairs, but that stems from the Art Fund's imposition of set terms of office for chairs. Finally, how much do the volunteers contribute financially? According to the Art Fund's website they raise £100,000 annually, but its most recent annual report states that in 2017 the volunteer committees raised '£354,000 through a variety of special events across the country'.³

As the criticisms voiced in the Times article make plain, this decision by the Art Fund's management and the inept way it has been implemented have unfortunately opened the organisation to allegations of ageism, since most volunteers are middle-aged or older. There is a suspicion that their demographic fits less well than it used to with an organisation with a much more metropolitan and centralised identity than it formerly possessed, increasingly keen to stress its commitment to the collecting of contemporary art, and understandably eager to make itself more attractive to younger members.

The Art Fund needs to be careful. It now spends widely in areas outside its core commitment to museum acquisitions. Much of this is highly worthwhile. For example, its support for curatorial programmes recognises that there is little point in funding acquisitions if the museums that receive them lack adequate resources to make the best of their collections. That recognition makes it all the odder that the Art Fund thinks that in future regional museums will have the capacity to mount the additional events programmes that are now contemplated and properly manage the volunteers running them. Given its apparent willingness to dispense with the £100,000 (or is it £354,000?) that the volunteer committees raise, the Art Fund's expenditure in other areas is likely to be more closely examined. Some of it seems to many people self-indulgent: for example, staging large dinners (how much do they cost?) to give a cheque for £100,000 to the winner of the Art Fund's Museum of the Year award. The fact that the chair of the Art Fund's trustees, Lord Smith of Finsbury (the former MP Chris Smith), has made no public statement about the decision to abolish the regional committees and has failed to communicate directly with the many volunteers who are extremely unhappy about the way they have been treated raises a more fundamental question: are the trustees of the Art Fund exercising due scrutiny of the executive that they are charged with overseeing?

1 S. Deuchar: 'Taking part and doing more', *Art Quarterly* (Winter 2018), pp.30–33.

2 D. Sanderson: 'Art volunteers put out of the picture', *The Times* (23rd January 2019). See also: 'How not to handle an Art Fund revolution', *Country Life* (16th January 2019), p.32.

3 See https://www.artfund.org/assets/about-us/annual-report/af_annual-report2018_full_catalogue.pdf, accessed 18th February 2019.