

## **The Investigation of the Institute for Contemporary Art Resources.**

(Taken from the Memoirs of Jason Briggs.)

The next unfortunate to be grilled by the Investigating Committee is the Director of the Institute for Contemporary Art Resources, an organisation once described as ‘for Contemptible Art Resources’ by an old-school art journalist. The Director, wearing oversized clothes reminiscent of a fashion-conscious lumberjack, drawn together in the middle by a red belt with a huge brass buckle, lounges in his chair looking confident. He shakes his long hair back from his face frequently and stares around at the panel. Theo Galvany, no doubt because of his success at brow-beating the previous occupant of the hot seat, seems to have been given the role of Chief Investigator.

Peering over his granny glasses, he says to the panel, “I’m going to read an entry from the Institute’s catalogue about a, har, work of art, for which this renowned gallery recently paid three million euros of tax-payers’ money. After which you will see the work on the video wall.” The Director nods approvingly. Galvany continues, “This is what the catalogue says. I quote: ‘The painting typifies the way in which the artist introduces undeniably organic fluidity into the geometric restrictions of the canvas. It has a richly spiritual calmness which enhances the viewer’s experience of its material nature and enables it to be accessed directly without depending on an accumulation of theoretical baggage.’” He pauses and looks around as though to ensure we have understood. Seemingly satisfied by our expectant faces, he continues, “It is however underscored by an awareness of the tensions which exist within painting’s self-referential history. In so doing it creates a new and fresh vocabulary which is distinct but open to continual reinvention and development.’ Unquote.”

He stops and the video wall lights up. It is blank and white. Nothing happens. A few panel members look around as though assuming there is a technical hitch. “No, gentlemen,” says Galvany in a loud tone, “There is nothing wrong with the video. What you are looking at is the painting. So called.” For a moment there is silence and then the panel reacts as it supposes it was meant to. They mutter in astonishment to one another, there is a loudly whispered ‘disgraceful’ and then, almost as one, they turn and stare at the Director. He is still lounging in his chair but looking at the video wall in rapt attention. Galvany leans forward and barks, “Well, sir?” The Director turns slowly and says, “Well, what?” There are a few gasps from around the room. George whispers to me quickly, “He doesn’t give a damn because he’s just accepted a new post in Kowloon.” Galvany, now very red in the face, slowly takes off his glasses. Very deliberately he says, “We would like to know, Mister Director, how you justify spending three million, three million euros of the taxpayers’ money, on a blank canvas. A canvas with nothing on it but white paint. A canvas worth, har, less than your fanciful and ludicrous description of it. Kindly explain to us your justification for this purchase.” The Director shakes his hair back from his face and says quietly, “I don’t think I care to. I suspect you would not be able to understand. In fact, I will not answer except to a panel

of my peers.” “Wow,” says George.

There is consternation on all sides. Journalists are busily tapping away on their portacoms, cameras are flashing, heads are craning forward to get a better view of the Director, still lounging comfortably. Galvany seems strangely unmoved by this apparently deliberate attempt to upset his interrogation. He carefully selects a document from amongst his papers on the table and replaces his glasses. He looks around in a significant manner at the panel, then stares around the room and things go quiet. “But you may have to answer to a more severe set of judges than are here present,” he says menacingly.

“I have looked into the circumstances of your acquisition procedure. And it appears you may have overstepped your authority.” A frisson of anticipation is evident amongst his listeners. The Director’s face is studiously blank.

“Overstepped your authority,” Galvany repeats. “Possibly with serious consequences.” He raises the document and studies it for a few pregnant moments.

“I understand that you are a close friend of the previous owner of this work,” he says gesturing contemptuously at the blank video wall, “And that the previous owner was in desperate need of money. To pay a certain indebtedness to the Internal Revenue, it seems.” The Director is no longer lounging in his chair and has assumed an upright posture. With an angry glance at the panel, he says, “That has nothing to do with it. The painting is a great work.”

“Not all of us would agree with that opinion,” says Galvany looking along the panel, several of whom nod wisely. “We shall leave that aside, for the moment,” he continues. “From the information made available to me, the money transfer to the previous owner was made on the 14th. of last month. But.” Again he looks significantly at the panel, “But. Your acquisition committee did not meet to approve the purchase until the 16th. of the month. The 16th. Two days later,” he emphasises, with unnecessary precision. “In essence, you paid for the purchase before your acquisition committee approved it.” His voice takes on the menacing tone again. “A flagrant disregard of correct procedure, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Oh boy,” says George, “He’s in deep trouble.” “Yes, George,” I respond. The Director is now looking less comfortable. In fact, he looks as though he suspects he is being led into a quagmire. But he hasn’t given up. He says, “You may add to your available information the fact that I had already discussed the painting with members of the acquisition committee and had obtained a consensus of agreement.” Galvany nods his leonine head.

“Indeed this is true,” he announces to the panel. But we can all see that he is not about to lose the argument.

“Except,” he says, “Except for those members of your committee who are appointed to their posts by His Majesty’s Government, to ensure that the interests of the tax-payer are properly represented. You did not consult them, I believe. I venture to suggest that you deliberately avoided consulting them, so that their views should not interfere with your desire to acquire this work of art. And whatever else you had in mind to achieve.” The import of what he is hinting is not lost on his listeners, nor on the Director, who is now on his feet and shouts, “A preposterous suggestion! In any case, they were not available. And I had a consensus. Which is perfectly proper procedure,” he adds sitting down

again. Galvany consults his papers again.

“Consensus or not,” he says, “Any work of art of a high purchase price must be viewed by all members of the acquisition committee. That is written very clearly in your charter. Is it not?” He is leading the Director more deeply into the quagmire. Before that unfortunate can reply, Galvany continues, “It is also in your charter that no purchase monies can be transferred until the acquisition committee’s decision has been minuted. Now, gentlemen,” he says, “It is true that the minute, a copy of which I have here, shows that there was indeed a consensus of agreement to buy. But,” he adds with obvious relish, “It is also noted that the government’s representatives, or rather I should say the taxpayers’ representatives, wished it to be recorded that they were not in agreement with the intended purchase. So we have a consensus,” he peers around at the panel again, “Which did not take account of the views of the members representing the important source of the funding for the acquisition of this work - this blank painting - which you have all had the pleasure of admiring here today. Worse, far worse, is the fact that the beneficiary of the three million euros, and again I point out that this worthy is a long time friend of the Director, received his gain before it was approved. He was very fortunate. He was able to meet the Internal Revenue’s deadline. They were fortunate. The Director was fortunate in achieving his objective. The only unfortunate party to the affair is the taxpayer. Who is three million euros to the bad, and is now the unwitting possessor of this remarkable painting.” The Director is clearly stunned at the implications. Galvany places his papers on the table. “These three million euros must be retrieved, sir!” he bellows at him. “Retrieved. We shall look to you to do it!” The Director is frantically pressing buttons on his portacom. “Calling his lawyer,” I say to George.