

The Belgravian

ART ATTACK

Threatening to both educate and entertain us at once, **Henry Hopwood-Phillips** meets the belle of the art world, Kate Gordon, as she outlines plans to elevate her London Art Studies courses to a new level



As I trundled along, Arts Club bound, in a rickshaw to meet Kate Gordon about her new public art courses hosted at Koffmann's at The Berkeley Hotel, two very obvious headwinds to her project rattled in my head.

Firstly, the British have always had an ambivalent relationship with art. Unless created in a garage-studio east of the Barbican with no regard for form, it has, fairly or otherwise, been associated with social and intellectual one-upmanship. Secondly, getting strangers to rub shoulders and communicate with one another about art in a manner that could not be described as cordial distance, sends a frisson of terror down the spine of every rosbif worth his or her salt, and seems a gratuitously cruel task to set oneself.

I set these rather plainspoken problems aside, however, when confronted by a rather dainty and refined lady who surprised me with both the admission she was slightly nervous and the faint mid-Atlantic accent in which she articulated the confession.

After a brief introduction of about two hours, during which the chianti cast its Tuscan spell, and nothing but history, art and philosophy was spoken of, eventually the debate wound itself round to her arty mission. I registered my concerns about social cement with her. 'Well my accountant told me to keep the wine prices down.' A pause. 'I told him it was impossible.' So there it was. She lubricated the wheels of intellectual exchange in the time-honoured way the ancients had at their symposiums, minus the musicians and dancing-women.

I pushed her; there must be more to it than plonk I insisted. 'Well, there are three types of lecturer: cloister academics, lecture-hall academics, and the sort of academics who actually like people,' leaving me in no doubt about which sort she netted. Normally I would be a bit cynical about such a claim. It is just what her market wants to hear. But I believe Kate. No doubt a major element of this trust is that she wears her own learning so lightly and is refreshingly inquisitive. I'm sure she asked me as many questions as I thrust at her. And so, in spite of a CV that lists St Paul's, Moscow University, Sothebys, Carlton TV and CNN among a litter of accomplishments, a spirit of enquiry rather than superficial egotism saturated our conversation.

I started to resent my own line of questioning. I had treated her as a normal subject and prepared a very underwhelming set of questions. Cursory queries about her 'favourite artist' fell deservedly flat on spikes of laughter. It wasn't that she didn't have one; it was that as the mind broadens, to fix on one torch at the expense of another, when all illuminate the artistic horizons, feels at best counter-intuitive and at worst pedantic.

Escaping the conversational cul-de-sac, I praised her business acumen in seeing a gap between the expert (someone

who Malcolm Gladwell estimated spends ten thousand hours on a subject or skill in *Outliers*) and the uninitiated public, worth cultivating. I wondered what main factors she attributed her one hundred per cent return rate to: 'Firstly, the courses are topical; I hear about exhibitions six months before they launch. Secondly, the course is a one-off five hours straddling the 10am-3pm period, enabling participants to get on with morning and late afternoon tasks. Thirdly, it is limited to 16 people – it's a small, cohesive group.'

Indeed, its success has been remarkable. In spite of the fact that her enterprise lacks any advertising and juggles undoubtedly high overheads at Koffmann's, it has continued to grow and grow. So what's been the great crowd-pleaser? 'Contemporary art,' she answers. I turned my nose up. Contemporary? 'Yes contemporary, what would you rather see, Henry?' (Chianti has the welcome effect of adding years to familiarity.) I declared myself a Carravaggio man. A bit of stabbing here, a bit of sex there, some shade over here – actually a lot of shade everywhere – a biblical scene radically reinterpreted there: the sort of art a man can say he likes without compromising any element of his masculinity whatsoever. We mused over the rogue's adventures for a bit before she admitted he would make a good character for a course. If so, I shall expect a little brown envelope for my inspired contribution.

Thinking the subject had best be changed before she thought my amateur attempt at blackmail sincere, I began applauding the food, completely unaware of course that I was paying her yet more compliments. Kate politely reminded me the chef at the Arts Club was trained by Pierre Koffmann – the grandfather of French cooking in London and one of the few to have gained three Michelin stars, and of course her *bras droit* behind the art. Koffmann concocts delicious meals for guests of Gordon's art talks. I question the atmosphere in the restaurant, is it overly formal? 'Far from it,' Kate responds, it's probably one of the only places where the cuisine is so good and yet you can get away with sneakers and a T-shirt.'

As lunch came to a very late close, I reflected on how Kate had actually underplayed the revolutionary aspect of her courses; re-soldering people and art back together is no easy task. Both art of the high tradition and post-modern period have had quite an alienating effect. It was a minor local official, a tax-farmer-turned-writer, Comte de Buffon, who reminded people in the 18th century that '*Le style est l'homme*' and Kate delivers a similar *cri de coeur*... albeit with Americanisms. ■

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Illustration / Russ Tudor