

Tessa Dwyer & Daniel Palmer, 'Doing it for Themselves: Artist-Run Alternatives & Contemporary Australian Art', in *Face Up: Contemporary Art from Australia* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2003) 44-55.

"We were just going to work outside the system. We didn't need it. But then we found it needed us because it was waiting for change."

– Tim Johnson, artist and founding member of 1970s artist collective Inhibodress

Recent studies reveal that, contrary to widespread myth, Australians display definite workaholic symptoms. Compared to populations in Europe, Asia and North America, Australians work longer hours, take shorter lunch breaks and fewer holidays. Some commentators attribute this tendency to the large number of descendants from migrant families, who traditionally work hard to secure themselves in a new environment. In addition, mobile phone usage and email in Australia is particularly high, further reducing quality 'downtime' while also suggesting a desire for connectedness. The workaholic trend has a bearing on all elements of Australian society, and is nowhere more noticeable than in the industry and energy that characterises the alternative 'artist-run' scene of its contemporary art world.

'Artist-run' is a loose term that can be applied to a physical gallery space, a conceptual project, a collective, or any combination of the above. Simply put, artists are in charge. Rebellious overtones often accompany the DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos of the artist-run initiative, whether anti-establishment or simply focused upon new, emergent practices. Other unifying factors include a community of peers and a distinctly local identity. While politics, styles and practices may differ from one space to another, a shared sense of community remains constant, with artist-run initiatives fulfilling important social functions through parties, performances and fundraising events.

Of course, artist-run spaces are in no way unique to Australia. In Germany, some examples are Peripherie in Stuttgart, Prima Kunst in Kiel and Capri in Berlin. However, in every country or city in which artist-run initiatives are located, distinct characteristics emerge. In Melbourne in particular, artist-run spaces (together with hip bars and nightspots) are typically found in out-of-the-way laneways reflecting the city's current fascination with under-stated style. A local sense of identity however does not preclude artist-run spaces from developing a genuine and meaningful internationalism. With artists communicating directly and informally, international links are forged more swiftly and organically than through the bureaucratic channels of larger organisations. For international visitors, the experience of seeking out or stumbling across an unassuming artist-run space can offer a more rewarding, specific and textured experience than visiting more officially recognised cultural markers.

Artist-run spaces in Australia are typically established by recent art graduates keen to continue a dialogue with peers. During art school, students are taught the value of exhibiting work in public and receiving feedback or critical comment. To establish an exhibition space with a group of like-minded individuals, according to shared philosophies and agendas, constitutes an

empowering move; and the fact that audiences are relatively small does not necessarily detract. In fact, in many cases, it enhances the interactivity and depth of the experience. With artists in control, traditional definitions between artist and curator, individual and institution are broken down. Artists become administrators, curators, writers and bookkeepers, while theorists, designers and musicians are encouraged to fuse disciplines and enter the nebulous world of contemporary art. Such fluidity significantly adds to the experimentation and innovation of the contemporary art scene.

The fourteen artists included in *Face Up: Contemporary Art from Australia* originate from various parts of Australia and the Asia Pacific. Together, they span a number of generations and reveal a diversity of practice, their heterogeneity suggesting the breadth and complexity of contemporary art in the region. Just as *Face Up* groups together various strands from an unwieldy and amorphous whole, artist-run spaces constitute one stratum within a vast and intricately layered composite. International biennales, triennials and art fairs, commercial and not-for-profit galleries, national and state organisations, curators, critics and funding bodies alike rely to some degree on the networks and ideas generated by the humble artist-run space. Conversely, the alternative models pioneered by artist-run spaces are necessarily shaped and defined in opposition to more established institutions. In this sense, artist-run spaces are intrinsic to the life cycle or ecology of contemporary art in Australia.

Any recent history of alternative art in Australia must begin by looking at the experimental practice of artists surrounding Sydney's Inhibodress artist collective during the early 1970s, and Melbourne's radical commercial gallery Pinacotheca, which ran as an artist co-operative from 1970 to 1973 while Director Bruce Pollard was overseas. This period was foundational for the development of 'post-object' and conceptual art practices involving photography, performance, video and installation. The support of the national arts funding body, the Australia Council, since 1973 has also been crucial. Beginning with the establishment of the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney (1973), Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide (1974), and the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane (1975), a new network of government-funded galleries had appeared in every capital city by the 1980s. Some of these emerged from artist-run initiatives, such as Artspace in Sydney and the Experimental Art Foundation.

Face Up artists **Fiona Hall** and **Robert MacPherson** were involved with spaces such as the Australian Centre for Photography and the Institute of Modern Art from early on. As fledgling organisations seeking to promote radical practices, theory and experimentation, they provided a clear precursor to today's artist-run space. MacPherson also exhibited at spaces established by abstract artist John Nixon, notably Art Projects in Melbourne (founded 1979). According to artist Peter Kennedy, one of the founding members of Inhibodress, the artist-run spaces of the early 1970s helped to create a climate of public support for experimental arts practices, directly influencing the establishment and outlook of the Australia Council's Visual Arts Board.

In Melbourne, during the resulting period of increased institutional support, 200 Gertrude Street (now Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces) was founded in 1983 and opened in 1985. At this time Melbourne's only non-commercial venues were the George Paton Gallery at the University of Melbourne and the new Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (1984). 'Gertrude' is a unique complex of gallery spaces and studio facilities that provides professional support to artists in the early stages of their careers through exhibition, studio and associated cultural exchange. With some artist involvement, Gertrude has been particularly important in the nurturing of Australian art, and has played host to inspired curatorial moves, from founding director Louise Neri through to Rose Lang and current impresario, Max Delany. Many of the artists in *Face Up* have either exhibited or held studios at Gertrude at some time in their career.

As if in response to this institutionalised confidence, during the 1980s artists in Sydney and Melbourne began to form their own galleries and modes of self-determination. In the late 1980s alternative spaces such as Melbourne's Store 5 and Sydney's First Draft and First Draft West (all inspired by Nixon's Art Projects) provided a focus for abstract, pop and post-minimalist practices. **Callum Morton** is one of many artists in *Face Up* to have been active in the artist-run scene of the 1990s. A peripheral figure at Store 5, he established a Melbourne branch of Critical Cities, based on a nomadic model initiated by the artist John Barbour in Adelaide involving fleeting exhibitions in private homes and public spaces such as cinemas and parks. Before gaining commercial representation, Morton held significant exhibitions at Gertrude and the Basement Project, in which his key thematics of public and private space, the interior and exterior, the model and the real, were all formed.

For a variety of reasons, Melbourne became the capital of artist-run galleries in the 1990s – a position it has retained to the envy of other states. Relatively cheap rent, inner-city laneways, and funding provided by supportive local and city councils gave rise to a thriving network of projects including Platform Artists Group, Temple, West Space, the Basement Project, Ether Ohnetitle, 1st Floor, Citylights, Stripp, DAMP, rubik and Grey Area, each with its own particular niche. The city has been a crucial agent in the success and meaningful contextualisation of these spaces: Platform operates two gallery sites located in the city's underground railway passes, while Citylights runs a series of lightboxes in unassuming alleyways.

Patricia Piccinini coordinated the Basement Project during its three years of operation from 1993-5, beginning when Store 5 had just ended and its artists 'ruled' Melbourne. Having recently graduated from art school, Piccinini gathered twelve artist-friends and found a basement space in the centre of the city in a former apothecary. One of the artists, Chris Langton, renovated the space and found lights in a dumpster outside the National Gallery of Victoria. While Piccinini never sold work from the Basement Project, she exhibited important early works there including an early version of the *Plasticology* installation. She acknowledges that it was here, in talking to visitors at the gallery, that she realised the importance of communicating ideas to an audience within her artwork. Indeed, she remembers the experience as far more valuable than art school.

Concurrently, **David Rosetzky** established 1st Floor: Artist & Writers Space, in 1994 with a group of around fifteen artists and writers. 1st Floor began in Rosetzky's warehouse living room with exhibitions that were limited to three afternoons a week. Each exhibition was accompanied by a number of short written pieces that varied widely in style and approach, providing multiple points of entry into the work. In this way, 1st Floor quickly established a unique identity that mixed conceptual practice with a communicative, expansive outlook. By 1996, 1st Floor had relocated to permanent premises, expanded shows to two-weeks, and developed a large following. Almost unwittingly, a curatorial style emerged that sought to situate contemporary art within popular culture, the everyday and the banal. 'Lifestyle' and 'identity' concepts were thoroughly explored through a number of links with local retail and industry outfits.

Both Morton and **Daniel von Sturmer** exhibited at 1st Floor. Indeed, von Sturmer has exhibited widely at artist-run spaces, including West Space, Penthouse & Pavement, Grey Area, Talk, Platform and Uplands in Melbourne and RubyAyre and Block in Sydney. This experience has been integral to the development of his practice, which has often involved physical interventions into the gallery's existing architecture. At 1st Floor and Melbourne's Centre for Contemporary Photography, von Sturmer has mounted major solo exhibitions where sections of wall have been removed or altered, encouraging a self-reflective process of re-orientation by the viewer. Artist-run spaces provided von Sturmer the freedom to experiment with architectural construction, which required a certain flexibility on the part the gallery.

Despite Sydney's larger population, it has never enjoyed the same wealth of artist-run spaces as Melbourne – the principal reasons being the high rent costs (intensified by the 2000 Olympics) and a less supportive city council. While the commercial gallery network is more organised in Sydney, the art community appears more fragmented. Nevertheless, Sydney's First Draft has continued to evolve and prosper through its uniquely democratic model of a rotating directorship and committee that changes every few years. Both Piccinini and **Mikala Dwyer** have exhibited at First Draft and the shorter-lived First Draft West.

Dwyer and Morton also regularly exhibited at CBD during the 1990s, a narrow inner city space remembered by many as the defining Sydney artist-run space of the decade. Throughout her career Dwyer has explored various alternative exhibition practices, through collaboration and curatorial projects at artist-run spaces. Another important space in Sydney since the mid-1990s has been Gallery 4A, the Asian Australian Artists Association space in Chinatown. Appearing at a time of Australia's growing political and cultural openness towards its position in the Asia-Pacific region, Gallery 4A has exhibited both **Ah Xian** and **Guan Wei**. It is also worth noting that although **Darren Siwes** has not been directly involved with artist-run spaces, as a young Indigenous artist from Adelaide, his urban photomedia practice traces a path paved in part by the establishment of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artist Co-operative in Sydney in 1987 by artists including Tracey Moffatt and Michael Riley.

For the purposes of a written history or mapping exercise, artist-run spaces prove an elusive subject. While some long-standing spaces have become permanent features in the landscape, in general artist-run spaces appear and disappear with great rapidity and varying degrees of visibility. At times, the limited lifespan of the artist-run space is built into its design, as with Elastic in Sydney and h. in Melbourne, conceived from the start as programs operating within a discrete period of time (around twelve months). Other spaces such as the Basement Project, Grey Area, RubyAyre, Stripp and Imperial Slacks lasted around two or three years, eventually closing when enthusiasm and commitment waned, or when circumstances changed.

Artist-run spaces are an urban phenomenon, and outside the big cities of Sydney and Melbourne, the scenes are much smaller. In Adelaide only one serious artist-run space has tended to operate at any given time, and currently that space is Downtown, located in a disused roller-skating rink in the city. The situation is similar in small centres such as Canberra and Hobart, presently home to Spiral Arm and Inflight respectively. In Brisbane, Soapbox Gallery has carved out a role as the centre of innovative installation practice, with its Director Franz Ehmman interested in “incongruities, difficulties, and failure in the sense of the Beckett dictum”.

Perth’s particular isolation on the Indian Ocean side of the continent has established its own community and innovative spaces borne of need. The Perth Institute of Contemporary Art occupies the cultural centre of town, but the 1990s saw Jacksue Gallery and later Verge become important experimental points. More recently, Breadbox has appeared, administered by the Artrage Festival. Even more remotely, Watch this Space in Darwin and Kick Arts Collective in Cairns, Northern Queensland, are two artist-run spaces established with purposeful regional agendas.

It is extremely difficult to speculate on just how artist-run initiatives have influenced the kind of art produced in Australia. Not only are the galleries often transitory, they also enable and encourage temporary, ephemeral and installation-based artwork. The type of practice emerging from artist-run galleries focuses on process over a saleable end product. Recently, for example, a sound art community has developed in Melbourne, with West Space and Bus (the offspring of a design firm of the same name) establishing dedicated ‘sound art’ spaces. Similarly, the prevalence of video art among younger artists has inspired Melbourne’s newest space The Kings to create a video gallery. Whilst much of this rich and diverse cultural scene goes unrecorded by history, artist-run spaces are able to adapt to such trends more immediately and creatively than larger institutions.

Older, more established artists treat these spaces with respect, offering support, involving themselves in exhibitions and contributing to fundraising events. Through their involvement they remain in open dialogue with new streams of emerging artists. Perhaps most importantly, artist-run spaces are about connections, communities, and ideas that occur in between the demarcations of official practices and organisations. Whether as stepping-stones for commercial success, or more self-consciously alternative modes of practice, they are spaces that engender maximum interaction between artists and audiences (with exhibitors themselves usually minding

the gallery), and encourage collisions between practices, disciplines and cultures. Like 'Happenings', their antics are often improper and irreverent, allowing ideas to freely circulate, mutate and regenerate. A new space in Melbourne, CLUBSproject, consciously articulates this vision, with its 'flexible structures' and promotion of dialogue above presentation.

At the same time, artist-run spaces are becoming increasingly professionalised, with member-specific skills, and the fostering of networks, not only locally and nationally but also, increasingly, internationally. Publications, international and regional exchanges are now a part of many artist-run programs, thereby transcending the national filter and overcoming a sense of cultural isolation. Artists are models of flexible labour, and associated artist-run businesses such as bars and clothing shops have also been recognised as a boon for city economies, while the fetishisation of inner city lifestyle drives up property values.

The importance of networking in turn flows into the practices of some artists. While rarely political in the traditional sense, the practice of emerging artists has tended to be participatory. Without the market imperative of the commercial gallery, artist-run spaces have been able to promote collaborative and participatory art practices. Strongly influenced by Geoff Lowe and Jacqui Riva's A Constructed World art project, the artist collective DAMP (formed 1995), for instance, has generated a number of performative works and events highlighting and complicating the role of the audience. Rather than a feigned marginality, several exhibitions at 1st Floor involved collaborations with local fashion boutiques and bars, and others treated the gallery space as an everyday micro-utopia in Nicolas Bourriaud's sense. Instead of art about art, regulars in the Melbourne artist-run scene such as Nat & Ali, Bianca Hester, Lyndal Walker and Sean Meilak are making art about artist networks.

Perhaps a sign of things to come is the unique hybrid that is TCB/Uplands. In Melbourne's Chinatown, up an alley and next to a sex shop, 'TCB Inc. Art' (Taking Care Of Business) is an artist-run space running side by side with a new commercial gallery called 'Uplands', run by an emerging artist and a former dealer's assistant. Uplands and TCB are independent and yet inseparable. TCB subleases from Uplands, but here the subsidy between the artist-run space and the commercial sector is transparent, without the dealer's usual eagle-eye detachment. Their deceptively casual 'anything goes' approach (including a gossipy newsletter called 'What Goes On?') hides an entrepreneurial irreverence that extends the resourceful sophistication characteristic of artist-run projects. At the last biennial Melbourne Art Fair, the most extensive gathering of commercial galleries in the Southern Hemisphere, rather than paying the ill-affordable cost of a stall, the young gallerists simply hired a limousine and shuttled collectors away from the art supermarket to their tucked-away gallery.

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