

REVIEW: ARI MODELS

Alison Lasek (<http://runway.org.au/category/contributor/alison-lasek/>)

It was obvious from the first visit that interesting things were happening at DUDSPACE. A back corner of the more established Melbourne artist-run space Kings ARI (literally the size of a broom closet and previously used as storage room or dumping ground for miscellaneous junk) has been taken over by recent VCA graduates Lyndal May Stewart and Madé Spencer-Castle as a place for showing critically engaged art in a 'dud' space. Admittedly it took me a few months to get there, once the word was already well and truly out. The exhibition I encountered on this initial visit in February 2013 was *Fontana Acqua*, a public shower installation by Jimmy Nuttall complete with tiles, drainhole and a dripping showerhead. The space, or lack thereof, challenges exhibiting artists to find new ways of presenting their work without big white walls and it's a new kind of intimate experience for the viewer.

In 2012 rental prices in Melbourne hit record highs and in May 2013 the Real Estate Institute of Victoria (REIV) reported the current median rent in Melbourne as \$390 per week.¹ Artist-run spaces are now operating in a very different environment to the 1990s, when rents were relatively cheap and local councils were highly supportive of new initiatives.² A deal like the one that CLUBSProject Inc. (Terri Bird, Bianca Hester, Kate McMahon, Spiros Panigirakis, Helen Walter, Helen Gibbins, Starlie Geikie and Michelle Usher) had in 2002—where the Builders Arms on Gertrude Street offered a five-year rent-free agreement and an interest-free loan of \$10,000 to establish the CLUBS space³—is unheard of in today's climate. It's more-or-less standard practice for Melbourne's artist-run spaces to charge an artist over \$500 for a three-week exhibition. An established artist-led organisation like West Space, who have significant amounts of government support and have reduced fees for exhibiting artists by 25% in 2013, are still working towards their long-held ambition of offering free gallery space for artists.⁴

With large doses of do-it-yourself energy, independent and alternative spaces have provided an entry point for artists into the history of Australian art since the early 1970s. This dates back to Inhibodress, the artist-run space established by Mike Parr as a focal point for post-abstract art in Sydney. If an alternative art space is one that sets out with a philosophy of independence from market forces and from the mainstream, commercial art scene, then despite the large number of artist-run spaces that exist, it would be hard to find a single contemporary art space that fits this narrow definition. In order to understand the level of integration that occurs between Melbourne's artist-run spaces and the broader art institution, historical prototypes will be revisited, such as John Nixon's Art Projects and David Rosetzky's 1st Floor, both of which advanced many artists' entry into the mainstream while simultaneously being seen as radically avant-garde. And while the term alternative becomes somewhat redundant here, two new and lesser-known Melbourne artist-run spaces will be acknowledged for the innovative way they respond to current rental prices and economic conditions, providing new opportunities for artists; DUDSPACE and Whitecubed.

John Nixon initiated Art Projects (1979 – 1984) to provide artists with an opportunity to take greater control over the discursive framework and the distribution of their work. The gallery was viewed as radically alternative. Jeffery Makin wrote in *The Sun* in 1979 'Art Projects is in every sense an anti-establishment radical gallery';⁵ however, Art Projects was in fact a commercial gallery. The title 'alternative' that was frequently applied to Art Projects was determined by the vanguard art it presented and the way a traditional viewing experience was challenged. At an economically bleak moment, the gallery created an intellectual community for a diverse group of artists who were connected through a shared interest in critical culture. In his 1996 article for *Like #1*, Tim Soden reflected on the way Art Projects provided a place for artists to experiment, free from the oppressive influence of the marketplace and public taste, in an era when commercial galleries still resisted the avant-garde.⁶ With many works exhibited at Art Projects later purchased for state and national collections, the gallery can be said to have facilitated entry into an institutionalised art world for a number of Melbourne artists who continue to exhibit in public contexts in Australia and overseas today.

Established in 1994 by David Rosetzky as a space for artists and writers, First Floor was described as an attempt to delineate an area that was 'new', 'alternative' or 'different'.⁷ Text was presented as parallel to the art rather than as distinct and separate practices. 1st Floor artists and writers worked together in an ongoing way, allowing art and theory to emerge together.⁸ Rather than aspire to work outside existing structures, the artists and writers established their own space, which complemented and enhanced opportunities available to them through exiting networks.⁹ A curatorial style emerged that sought to situate contemporary art within popular culture, the everyday and the banal.¹⁰ Their collective vision and strategic approach was recognised by the broader art community and in 1996 four 1st Floor artists were chosen to exhibit in Primavera at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Four 1st Floor writers were also included in the exhibition.¹¹

The idea of an 'alternative' space that operates independently from the mainstream commercial art world has become somewhat irrelevant. However, there are a number of artist-run galleries in Melbourne who, with innovative ways of thinking, have been able to respond to the current conditions and offer something 'different'.

DUDSPACE is able to offer free exhibitions and as a result, curate the entire program. Madé Spencer-Castle believes this means artists can take more risks when exhibiting: 'I think there's a lot of pressure when you pay for a space, particularly when it's upwards of \$1,000, and artists tend to want to show something polished and fully resolved'.¹² Kings ARI also benefits from the arrangement as DUDSPACE brings more people to its openings, and Co-Directors Spencer-Castle and Lyndal May Stewart and now rent an office area upstairs to administrate the space, which they pay for themselves. The next steps for May Stewart and Spencer-Castle will be the launch of DUDPROJECTS, a curatorial banner for larger and more involved projects that take place outside of the gallery space, and putting together information on DUDSPACE to be part of the Kings ARI ten-year historical publication.¹³

Whitecubed Gallery, initiated by Brendan McCleary and Pip Jones, literally takes the form of a white cube made from PVC piping, emerging in a new location each day.¹⁴ The PVC piping is the only thing defining the exhibition space, which is otherwise part of the street or landscape where it has been erected. Previous locations have included the north forecourt of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Gertrude Street sidewalk and the rooftop at Curtain House. Operating without funding or official approval from the council (who would need to know their exact locations well in advance) affords Whitecubed the necessary flexibility to relocate based on weather and other exhibition requirements such as power. While there is no rent or overhead costs for Whitecubed, and artists do not need to pay to exhibit, McCleary identified one of the main challenges as the cost of time. Whitecubed is currently open three days per week and McCleary and Jones are the ones who mind the space, which means there is quite a bit of time when they cannot be working on other projects or in a paid position; 'it's also not a space where you can pop out and get a coffee because someone will steal your TV; you cannot lock it'.¹⁵ The exhibition locations are announced on Facebook but most of their audience comes from chance encounters with the general public; people who just happened to be passing by. This is in opposition to other artist-run spaces, who often see it as the role of larger public galleries to push audience access for contemporary art, believing their resources don't stretch far enough to capture an audience outside their existing network of peers and associates.¹⁶

The definition of 'alternative' spaces as having 'a philosophy of independence from market forces and from the mainstream, commercial art scene' fails to recognise the way many of these artist-run spaces complement the existing structures. They provide a context for radical cultural possibilities as well as facilitating a passage for many artists to engage with a professional contemporary art sector. While artist-run

spaces may disappear over the years and reappear in new forms, they continue to play an invaluable role in representing the energy, vitality, ideas and new approaches in the art world that may otherwise simply be overlooked.

1. Real Estate Institute of Victoria (REIV) website, www.reiv.com.au/ (<http://www.reiv.com.au/>).
2. Tessa Dwyer and Daniel Palmer, 'Doing it For Themselves: Artist Run Alternatives and Contemporary Australian Art' in Britta Schmitz (curator), *Face Up: Contemporary Art from Australia*, Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2003, p. 48
3. Sandra Bridie, 'Interview with Terri Bird, Bianca Hester, Kate McMahon and Spiros Panigirakis CLUBSProject Inc., October 2002', in Sandra Bridie (ed.), *Artists/Artist-Run Spaces*, West Space Inc., Melbourne, 2003, p. 16
4. West Space website, westspace.org.au/applications
5. Jeffery Makin, 'A radical project to fill the gap', *The Sun*, 14 March, 1979, p. 44
6. Tim Sowden, 'Artists Inc. The Rise of Melbourne's Artist-Run Spaces', *Like, Art Magazine*, 1, October 1996, p. 26
7. Tessa Dwyer and D.J. Huppertz, 'Introduction' in *1st Floor, A495*, 1st Floor A4/95 production, Melbourne, 1995, p. 3
8. Sandra Bridie, 'Interview with David Rosetzky, 1st Floor, December 1997', in Sandra Bridie (ed.), *Artists/Artist-Run Spaces*, Talk Artists & West Space, Melbourne, 1998, p.36
9. Charlotte Day, 'Culture Club: Artist Initiated Activity in Melbourne', in Tessa Dwyer et al (eds.), *Good Thinking, Words and Pictures on Contemporary Art, First Floor Artists and Writers Space*, Melbourne, 2000, p. 10
10. Tessa Dwyer and Daniel Palmer, 'Doing it For Themselves: Artist Run Alternatives and Contemporary Australian Art' in Britta Schmitz (curator), *Face Up: Contemporary Art from Australia*, Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2003, p. 50
11. Tessa Dwyer, D.J. Huppertz and Sarah Tutton, 'Camping and Tramping, 1st Floor Artists and Writers Space 1994-2002', in *Pitch Your Own Tent, Art Projects / Store 5 / First Floor*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2005, p. 79
12. Email correspondence with Spencer-Castle, 6 June, 2013
13. Email correspondence with Spencer-Castle, 6 June, 2013
14. Whitecubed website: <http://whitecubed.org/index.php/home/about/> (<http://whitecubed.org/index.php/home/about/>).
15. Conversation with McCleary, 5 June, 2013
16. Sandra Bridie, 'Interview with Brett Jones, West Space Inc. October 1997', in Sandra Bridie (ed.), *Artists/Artist-Run Spaces*, West Space Inc., Melbourne, 2003, p.7



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Alison Lasek is an arts writer, curator and professional based in Melbourne. She currently holds the position of Public Programs Coordinator at the Australian Centre... (<http://runway.org.au/category/contributor/alison-lasek/>).

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