

ARTICLE: Home and Away

WORDS: Jasmin Stephens

Once upon a time, Perth's most ambitious graduates went travelling and then moved east, returning home once a year to see family and friends. In 2012, relocating to Melbourne is still their preferred 'next step', but in recent times their visits home have become more frequent.¹ The vitality of the artist-run scene in Perth, together with the increasing number of residencies on offer across the state, has meant that these artists are being recalled to participate in more exhibitions, forums and dialogues.²

Graduates of Perth's three art schools can face indifference to their existence and what they do in their home city.³ Audiences for the visual arts are proportionally lower than in other Australian cities with, perhaps, the exception of work by Indigenous artists. In general, if one is speaking about the arts in Western Australia, the conversation will begin with Aboriginal art.

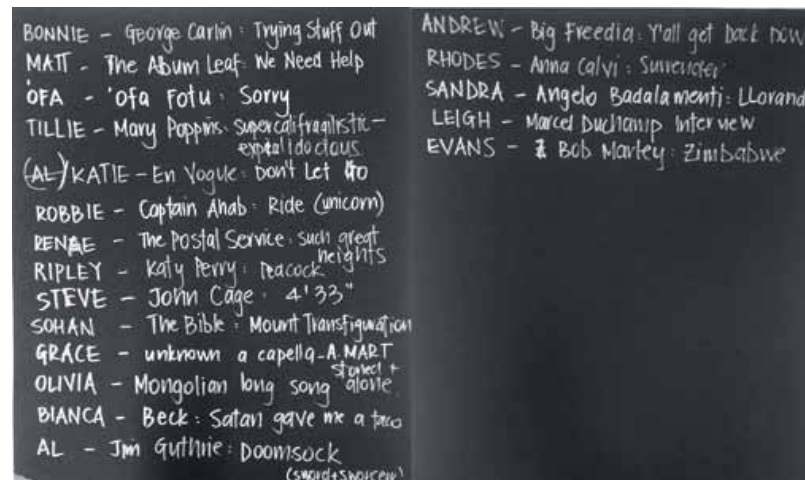
Due to its geological wonders, Western Australia is one of the few places in the world with a developed economy where the 'creativity agenda' that is used to justify 'investment' in arts and culture has not taken hold. In contrast, Queensland, which is equally reliant on its primary industry and mining sectors, has projected itself as the 'Smart State' in ways that have benefitted the arts. To use the jargon, Western Australia has an 'extractive' rather than a 'knowledge-based' economy that, even with the concentration of expertise in the resources sector, has led to lower levels of patents, research and development, and associated venture capital than other states.⁴

The social fabric of Western Australia with its myriad stories of hardship and fortune has a mitigating effect on the reception of the arts. Migrant groups, such as recent arrivals from the UK and from southern Africa, have a material focus. Previous arrivals from Britain

emigrated before the UK's 'mainstreaming' of the arts that led to major galleries being established in the regions. Without experience of the profile and inclusive agenda of these institutions, many Brits still retain the perception that participation in the arts is above all an indicator of class. For Africans of all cultural backgrounds, negotiating the dislocations caused by the ripple effect of FIFO (fly-in fly-out) rosters, as with so many workers from the Eastern States, is consuming.

Perth is refreshingly free of deference to status and prestige. Unlike its longitudinal neighbours, Singapore and Hong Kong, who are vying to be pre-eminent in artistic affairs in the region, Perth displays an acceptance of its lack of consequence as an 'ordinary city' — its sense of light and space notwithstanding.⁵ Despite Perth Festival artistic director Jonathan Holloway's reminder that Perth has an economy that can bear an expansion of the arts, it is this acquiescence that is responsible for many artists leaving and for those who stay, committing to travel.

Artists (and curators) in Perth do indulge in fantasies about living in bigger cities where more separation from commodified mindsets — such as the celebrated 'bogan' lifestyle — becomes possible. In cities such as Melbourne and Sydney, artists also seem to enjoy greater social approval. While envying this positive attention, artists in Perth do continue to pose critical questions about how and why artists should differentiate themselves from their cities. Artist-run initiative (ARI) activities in Perth are potentially more likely to be characterised by a critical relationship to established arts institutions and to the dominant social ethos than in other cities.⁶ Against this backdrop of dissonance between Perth's visual artists and the 'boom' mentality, three artist-run initiatives — Galleria, OK Gallery and Museum



Lauren Brown
Give Me Something to Listen To: Playlist 2012
performance
Image courtesy the artist
Photo credit: Lauren Brown

of Natural Mystery — were established last year, rapidly becoming central to the City's artist-led scene.

With the tagline 'Open by Necessity', The Museum of Natural Mystery (MNM) was begun by David Egan and Patrick Miller at their North Perth home in May 2011. The ARI's name is a homage to a local eccentric private museum owner and reflects the flavour of recent shows that have explored the quotidian and immanent aspects of craft, identity and place. When MNM recently took up a residency at Fremantle Arts Centre (FAC), Thomas Jeppe, who is originally from Perth and now living in Melbourne, presented *Nature of Submission* in the form of a working discussion at FAC and an exhibition at the Museum.

OK Gallery is a commercial space that was opened by Jamie Macchiusi, Andrew Varano and Gemma Weston in a remodelled Northbridge dry-cleaning premises in August 2011. After undertaking residencies at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) and contributing to several artist-organised group shows, they have gradually incorporated a commercial model into their varied practices as they have felt ready to take on the visibility

associated with representing artists. The represented and non-represented artists they show are exhibiting elegant works that stem from investigations into the relationship between materials, perception and form.

The tale of Galleria, housed in an East Perth warehouse that also accommodates seven studios, is edifying. Two of its founders, Daniel Bourke and Clare Wohlneck, established Benchwork, a design, printing and sandwich-making business, while on Centrelink's NEIS scheme. With an allowance that enabled them to do other paid work, they built on the experience Wohlneck gained through her Coastal Shelf publication business, acquiring the confidence they needed to start Galleria with two colleagues, Emily Morant and Reece York, in September 2011.

Named after one of Perth's most prominent shopping centres, Galleria has an impressive board and is funded mostly by exhibitors, studio rent and bar contributions. Bourke foresees that programming will be by application and invitation and of a national and international nature. He also expresses a concern for artists who have not exhibited for a long time or

colleagues who may be wavering in their practices. Galleria's program is framed by the breadth of the studio artists' interests in fashion, film and visual arts and will eventually include a shop and occasional food court.

More dispersed than ARIs in other cities, the programming at these spaces has often involved the same artists being shown across the three venues. David Egan, whose exhibition with Reece York at OK is reviewed by Andrew Purvis in this issue, has done so. Thus, when work is shown at OK it tends to be more formally considered and at MNM there is more emphasis on narrative and relational perspectives. The complexion of Galleria's situation has yet to emerge. Consequently, these early career practitioners have quickly gained a lot of exposure and a context for the reception of their work.

This symbiotic relationship will be acknowledged in the exhibition, *HERE&NOW2012*, that Katie Lenanton is curating for Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at the University of Western Australia later this year.⁷ Intended to be an annual survey of Western Australia's up-and-coming artists, Lenanton's first edition will include satellite activities at the three venues. Through *HERE&NOW2012*, Lenanton is not only recognising the programming potential of this distinctive configuration of ARIs but she is responding to a context that has seen four artist-led initiatives, a new commercial gallery, a revitalised university space and the upgrading of a photography centre get underway since February 2011.⁸ It is difficult to imagine such recently established ventures as Galleria, OK and MNM being legitimised in this way in other cities.

On the other hand, these spaces have had a visible impact in Perth in a very short space of time — largely due to the determination of their directors, the advantages that their connectedness has brought and the small, isolated nature of the scene. While all the directors have expressed some surprise at the strength of the art world's response and OK's directors continue to marvel at people they

don't know coming into their shopfront gallery, there is no denying the greater sense of purpose that many artists are evincing.

The directors of these three spaces share objectives that they argue distinguish them from Perth's more established institutions and commercial galleries as well as their ARI colleagues. They argue that their modest structures and focused artistic concerns, combined with the financial autonomy afforded by their second jobs, enables them to program to a more consistent standard. As they acknowledge how their galleries complement other initiatives and organisations, they also point to their own programming as more tactical than other ARIs and more attentive to the needs of emerging artists than the sector in general.

All the Perth ARIs — active in exhibitions and other discursive forms such as discussions and workshops — would concur that the city's remoteness and the strength of the local economy has led to artists sustaining exhibiting and teaching practices without due regard for current developments in the visual arts. Furthermore, local initiatives — AC4CA, Feedback etc., free range, Kurb, Nyzsitor Studio, Oats Factory, Paper Mountain, Rhinoceros and Studio Nights included, are united in offering opportunities for individuals to gain a feel for all kinds of organising. free range, which has a proposal system, is also notable for its long-standing role in scheduling exhibitions at short notice and by newcomers.

Another important feature of Galleria, OK and MNM is that their directors are committed to publishing texts to accompany their exhibitions. Arising out of a shared affinity for language and publication, they are conscious of resisting the amnesia that inscribes any culture re-calibrating itself to the cycle of boom and bust. Robert Cook, curator at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, has been consistently elucidating the toll exacted by this erasure — a concern shared throughout the Perth art scene. Whether evident in the meticulous production of

MNM's stitched paper catalogues or the role of Gemma Weston's writing in how OK conceptualises its exhibitions, this concern is central and the writing that is being generated seems prodigious.

As part of *HERE&NOW2012*, Dan Bourke will present workshops that draw on his affection for the 'Risograph' printer and his interest in the history of artist-run initiatives in general. He cites the Black Dog publication *City Racing: The Life and Times of an Artist-Run Gallery 1988–98*, and West Space's past publications as formative. OK will be convening an ambitious three-day symposium on 'sustainable critical art practice' in Perth. The symposium will reach back to the 'alternative' Fremantle artists' organisation, Praxis, which along with other initiatives such as its journal, *Praxis M*, and ARX (Artists Regional Exchange), led to the establishment of PICA in 1989.

Looking forward, history tells us that many of Perth's current initiatives will continue to be ephemeral or short-lived. One legacy that will endure is the benefits that the artists have derived from the

consistent attention of writers, ARI peers, institutional curators and audiences during this intense period. The work that is being produced and the strategies being deployed by these artists and the ARIs they are linked to will warrant more consideration. Ultimately, it is not the increase in the number of ARIs that will be appraised but the calibre of their activities.

As the most remote capital city in the world, artists will continue to leave Perth, departing for Melbourne and other cities across the globe. Increasingly, however, they will pursue projects in Perth, returning as often as finances permit, carrying ideas in and out. In doing so, they will not only reflect the flows of people, information and perspectives that join Perth to the rest of the world but will be generating new possibilities for 're-routing' beyond and across established lines of connection.⁹

Jasmin Stephens is an independent curator in Perth. As a recipient of a Western Australian Government Fellowship, she is curating at PICA and Spectrum Project Space, Edith Cowan University.

NOTES

1. The scope of my essay does not permit a consideration of the reasons why Perth artists follow the progress of the Melbourne as opposed to the Sydney art scene more closely.
2. Central Institute of TAFE, cia studios, Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Spaced: Art out of Place (IASKA), SymbioticA and Turner Galleries conduct residency programs.
3. The art schools are Central Institute of TAFE, Curtin University of Technology and Edith Cowan University. The University of Western Australia previously offered studio subjects.
4. Drawn from opening remarks by Tania Hudson, Chair, FORM Board, introducing social entrepreneur Tim Jones, CEO & President, Artscape, Toronto, in Perth, 12 March 2012. FORM and Artsource have concertedly asserted the social and economic benefits of the arts as has the WA Chamber of Arts and Culture, chaired by Sam Walsh, CEO of Rio Tinto.
5. Thanks to Woon Tien Wei of Singapore ARI, Post-Museum, for providing a completely different slant on the notion of an 'ordinary city'. He cites Heather Chi's heretical idea of 'ordinarising' Singapore's 1989 Renaissance City Plan, referencing her unpublished paper, 'Can Space Speak? Independence, Creativity and Social Action in Singapore: a case study of Post-Museum', 2011, in his unpublished DCA thesis, *Art in a Knowledge-Based Economy: Artist/Cultural Activist Strategies in Singapore's Renaissance*, 2012.
6. Conversations with Steve Bull and Kelli McCluskey of pvi collective together with recent discussion with Lauren Brown and Robbie Karmel on this topic have been appreciated. See also my exhibition, *Yellow Vest Syndrome: recent west Australian art*, 31 January – 29 March 2009, Fremantle Arts Centre.
7. *HERE&NOW2012* will be presented 10 August – 6 October 2012 and the accompanying Symposium convened by OK Gallery, 26–29 September 2012.
8. Museum of Natural Mystery, OK Gallery, Galleria, Paper Mountain, VENN Gallery, Edith Cowan University's Spectrum Project Space, and Perth Centre for Photography.
9. These ideas inform my forthcoming exhibition, *Yonder*, to be presented at PICA, 8 September – 21 October 2012. A longer discussion would incorporate recent ARIs — Alda's, Ballroom, Love is My Velocity and Palm Court; ongoing projects — Bureau of Ideas and Tura's Club Zoo; and the role of curators whose national and international activities has included time in Perth.