

The Politics of Space – from ‘alternative’ spaces to artist-run initiatives

By Peter Anderson

First published in *Art Monthly (Australia)* no.19 (April 1989) pp. 25-27

*

It has often been argued that if artists were less concerned with the political struggles of the artworld, the production and exhibition of art would be a much simpler process. For example, the 1986 McLeay Report, *Inquiry into Commonwealth Assistance to the Arts*, portrayed artists and their kin as a gang of self-interested political operators who had taken control of the public infrastructure with scant regard for the needs of ordinary people. Politics, the report suggested, is for politicians, and the sooner artists get back to making artistic, rather than political decisions, the better.

However, a negative attitude towards artworld politics is not simply the preserve of ‘outsiders’. Critics, curators, commercial dealers, and even artists themselves can often be found sneering at those who take such activity seriously: many a tall poppy has been cut down with a sly suggestion that their elevated position is based on political manoeuvres, rather than the quality of their art. This would seem to suggest that an involvement in the politics of the artworld is in the best interests of neither art nor artists.

Such a negative view is, I think, fundamentally wrong, and seems to be based upon some wishy washy notion that *real* artists are above such things. On the contrary, part of the work of any artist is political, and should therefore involve an engagement with decision making processes that determine future directions. Of course, this position is nothing new to those artworkers involved in what are now being called *Artist-Run Initiatives* (ARI), and it is this area of activity I wish to focus on here. In particular, I want to examine some of the shifts in the field, and to attempt to clarify the central issues that have structured the (political) positions taken up.

On the surface, the most obvious problem is the division between the publicly funded Contemporary Art Spaces (CAS) and the essentially co-operative Artist-Run Spaces (ARS). The distinction between these two classifications was the subject of the *Hindsight* forum held at First Draft in Sydney during October 1987, and it again surfaced as an issue at the Queensland Artworkers Alliance speakeasy, ‘The Politics of Space’, in September 1988.

While appropriating the title of the QAA forum (at which I acted as Chair) I do not intend to provide a report of it, nor will I argue that the division between CAS and ARS revolves around questions of physical space – although in the Brisbane context it is certainly the case that the lack of affordable studio and exhibition space has been the incentive for much discussion, particularly following the closure of THAT space and John Mills National at the end of 1987. No doubt the problems around the Ultimo Project in Sydney also highlight such

concerns. However in relation to the longer-term debates in the field, the most significant arguments seem to focus on the classification of specific ventures in the context of funding eligibility. The various shifts in nomenclature of ‘spaces’, with Artist-Run Initiatives being the most recent, could well be of use in identifying some of the problems.

The first point to make here is that the divisions between organisational types are the product of quite diffuse processes. However the of specific funding frameworks by government arts bodies have certainly played a key role in cementing differences. For example, the *Programs of Assistance* booklets produced by the Visual Arts Board (now the Visual Arts / Craft Board) provide a practical surface on which some of the distinctions are marked out. Without going into a detailed analysis of all the policy changes in this area, which would involve a close scrutiny of everything from policy documents to grant application forms and publicity material, it is possible to trace changes at the level of the names being used; to look at the shift away from the all-encompassing title ‘Alternative Space’.

In the 1983 *Programs of Assistance* booklet, ‘Support for Organisations’ is directed to ‘helping a selected group of organisations establish and maintain “alternative spaces” for contemporary art in major centres’. Judy Annear, in the paper she delivered at the *Hindsight* forum, pointed out that it was at the ‘*Open Sandwich*’ *First National Conference of Alternative Spaces*, held in Hobart in May 1983, that the term ‘Contemporary Art Space’ was used to identify organisations already receiving funding under this program: ‘it was recognised that these organisations were very much part of the art bureaucracy and that it was essential to take an aggressive rather than defensive role within the system to retain integrity and a sense of identity’ (I’m quoting here from the published version of the *Hindsight* papers put together by the Canberra Centre for Contemporary Art).

The appearance of the phrase ‘contemporary art space’ in the title of the Organisations Program in the 1984 VAB grants booklet begins the process of administrative consolidation of the CAS network. In 1985 the booklet formally names these spaces ‘Contemporary Art Spaces’, placing them in relation to ‘Artist-run Spaces’ and indicating the Board’s intention to develop a ‘detailed policy of assistance’ following research into the ‘needs and concerns’ of ARS in Australia. The basic division between CAS and ARS is maintained in both the 1986 and 1987 booklets. But with the revision of programs after the amalgamation of the VAB and the Craft Board (in 1987), both terms disappear and a new term, ‘major clients’, is introduced as a classifying mechanism in 1988. Of course it is important not to read too much into these changes as other factors clearly come into play, and in any case, some of these shifts may be no more than ‘accidents’ of the grant booklet production process.

In his *Hindsight* forum paper, ‘The Contract of Dependence’, Rob McDonald (co co-ordinator of Art Unit) argues that ‘the distinction in name between CAS and ARS is artificial and based exclusively on funding from the Australia Council and state arts funding bodies’. This claim indicates the source of much of the heat of the debates. It identifies the key problem as the perceived imposition of an *artificial* division by funding bodies, which McDonald claims is ‘discriminatory in the short term and unworkable in the long term’. He

further argues that a further negative impact of the division is that it has ‘aroused bitterness and divisiveness’ within the sector.

But it is not only the division of the alternative spaces field into two types of organisation that has caused problems, but also the mechanism used to formally establish the CAS category in the first place. This process began in advance of the development of the 1985 Australia Council policy documents concerning CAS – *Review of the Visual Arts Board’s program of Assistance for Contemporary Art Spaces* (March 1985) and *Policy Discussion Paper on Contemporary Art Spaces* (October 1985). For example, in late 1983 Brisbane’s institute of Modern Art went through a period of great uncertainty as a result of its divergence from one of the newly introduced conditions under the VAB’s ‘Support for Organisations’ program: ‘the organisation must have a full-time professionally qualified and experienced director’.

At that time the IMA was operating a ‘guest curator program’ under the management of gallery co-ordinator Barbara Campbell and an experienced exhibitions sub-committee. Financial constraints prohibited the appointment of a full-time director without substantially reducing the artistic program and, as the VAB acknowledged, the Institute was both well managed and artistically successful. Despite this, their stance on the appointment of a full-time director could not be swayed and they argued that the IMA either complied with the VAB’s conditions or funding would be cut.

While this dispute was resolved fairly quickly, the rifts in the community were long term, and continued after the appointment of a full-time director. Avoiding the detail of the argument, it can be noted that the question of VAB imposed structures again played a significant role. The VAB’s perception of the IMA as one of *their* ‘contemporary art space flagships’ contrasted with the dominant local feeling that the wishes of the organisation and its constituency were not being fully considered.

Thus it may well be that many of the problems in the alternative spaces field have been the product of an awkward relationship between bureaucratic structures and the fluidity of activity at a ‘grass roots’ level. The fact that the VAB’s development of detailed policy in the in this field was not initially formulated in a unified way, but was divided by the headings of CAS and ARS, appears to have compounded the problem. This is not to say that some benefits have not flowed from this classificatory system, but simply to point out that the desire to develop a national CAS network may well have dominated local needs and approaches.

The 1988 release of the *Artist-Run Spaces Research Report* which was initiated back in 1984, adds a further dimension to this debate. The report, prepared for the VAB by Karilyn Brown who also played a major role in the 1985 *Contemporary Art Spaces Review*, confirms the division between CAS and ARS, contrasting the common aims of the CAS with a ‘diversity of philosophical and operational approaches among Artist-Run Spaces’. The direction suggested by its recommendations is one that would encourage this diversity, rather than attempting the impossible task of adopting a single model. However, at the QAA *Politics of*

Space forum there was some confusion as to the role this report would have in the development of future policy, in particular how the document might fit in with funding guidelines in their present form.

Current programs under which artist-run operations might receive funding emphasise national networking or the national significance of the project, as well as suggesting that such organisations ‘provide services to artists’. This might exclude the majority of artist-run ventures from the VABs funding priorities, which is not necessarily negative, as the view that artist run activities *should* conform to such priorities is somewhat problematic. In addition, while it is clear that many artist-run projects are established with the aim of providing ‘services’ to a community, the language used to discuss these activities frequently masks the relationship between the organisation and the artists who constitute it.

A number of quite clear examples of this can be found in the account of Brisbane Alternative Spaces given by Stephen Rainbird in the Spring 1988 issue of *Art and Australia*. In discussing *Red Comb House* and *One Flat Exhibit*, Rainbird writes: ‘two special initiatives were undertaken to support younger, less established artists’. Later he notes that ‘The Observatory, another loose collective, gave much needed support to younger artists’. While I’m not claiming that younger artists did not find these activities supportive, I do think that such phrasing tends to divide the organisation from those it ‘supports’. What needs to be made much clearer is that these organisations were established *by* ‘younger artists’, to support themselves. The problem here may well result from the way the construction of a ‘corporate identity’ suggests that the organisation is somehow divorced from those who operate under its title.

The recent move towards the use of ‘Artist-Run Initiative’, with its connotations of new and independent action, as opposed to the ARS focus on ‘places where things happen’, may well assist in changing the way such ventures are understood. Unfortunately, strategies developed by artists are not always easy to locate within the bureaucratic models which are currently seen as legitimate by funding bodies. In attempting to negotiate the fine line between providing alternative structures and having the legitimacy of a particular approach acknowledged, artists need not only to look towards the future, but also need to develop a sense of the recent history of practice in this area. This means not just focusing on art works, but also on questions of organisation, politics and policy, for without the huge amount of work that has gone into these areas in the past, much of the most challenging contemporary art might never have ‘emerged’.