History in the making…

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Pitch Your Own Tent brings a specific lineage of artist-run spaces into the academy of art history; Art Projects, Store 5 and first Floor. This is the first time this has been performed in such a historicised manner. Though we have seen this with individual spaces—*Inhibodress 1970-1972* curated by Sue Cramer at IMA in 1989, and most recently *Store 5 is…* at Anna Schwartz Gallery in 2005—the intergenerational survey approach of *Pitch Your Own Tent* evidences the activities of artist-run spaces becoming worthy of mainstream academic scholarship.[1] Which ironically seems far removed from their original motivations and intentions.

But is it? Was this particular lineage of artist-run activity outside market-institutional codes and authorising systems? Were they oppositional models in the true sense of the radical avant-garde or were they market leaders for new art? Just where did their aspirations lie and how foreseeable was their entrance into the mainstream annals of contemporary Australian art?

I want to touch on these questions by trying to determine how these spaces and artists went about setting the conditions for their histories to be written. And indeed, contributed to writing these histories. I have commented that artist-run spaces should be the ones writing their histories, partly out of necessity as no one else is going to do so, but partly because their ethos of self-determination entitles them to carve a historical space. Whether these histories are noticed or embraced by the academy is another issue.

The 'strategy of curatorial positioning' first adopted by Art Projects represented a more direct relationship with the 'system dynamics of art'[2] consistent with the understanding that artists required market-institutional recognition in order develop some form of sustainable practice. Whilst Art Projects may be seen within a radical vanguard tradition, especially through the work of Mike Parr vis a vis Inhibodress, this perception was indexed to a local context. Within the international arena, what was happening in Melbourne in the early 1980s was largely unexceptional. The term 'avant-garde' was more of a reaction to what the major art galleries and commercial galleries considered innovative art in Australia at the time.

The exhibition and publication make little attempt to give the activities of the three spaces and the art they exhibited any kind of international context. Though this is not necessarily a problem, because the exhibition is dealing with contained local histories, it does reveal how the spaces affirmed themselves through a localised community. For example, though Inhibodress is connected to Art Projects through the exhibition of work by more senior conceptual artists including Mike Parr, to include Inhibodress would have complicated the curatorial premise by referencing activities beyond Melbourne and Australia. Perhaps it would have made the exhibition unwieldy and presented to many loose threads. But it would also have demonstrated just how regional these three spaces were. There are few examples of these artist-run spaces working with organizations overseas or benchmarking their activities with parallel organizations outside Australia.[3]

It is good to see exhibitions that provide research and scholarship about strains of practice in Australian art that are less visible to mainstream audiences. However, new research in museums should also be excavating the obscured, marginalised, underground and non-mainstream activities of artists in Australia. The activities of the three spaces in the exhibition

[1] In contrast, the exhibition *Situation: Collaborations, Collectives and Artists' Networks from Sydney, Singapore and Berlin* curated by Russell Storer showing con-currently at MCA, presented the activities of three artist-run initiatives/collectives currently operating. This exhibition discussed collaborative and exchange based practices from an international perspective.
[2] Carolyn Barnes, Defiance as a Constructive Principle Art Projects: 1979 – 1984, in *Pitch Your Own Tent*, Monash University Museum of Art, 2005, p.5
[3] The exception being First Floor's connections with The Physics Room and Fiat Luz in New Zealand.

were never obscured or marginalised. And though their activities were largely invisible to a general public, they were recognised to varying degrees by the mainstream art world of the day. It all depends on what roles museums should assume. In the case of museums attached to research universities, it is appropriate for them to encourage and initiate research into areas not undertaken by the larger state galleries and museums.

Pitch Your Own Tent packages a linear history that is well bracketed. The connections and links are transparent and the context is well defined. The historical value of the exhibition is predetermined. It is in fact possible to argue that the historical value was determined by the spaces themselves while they were operating as Max Delany, curator of the exhibition and Artistic Director at MUMA, points out '…the exhibition contends that it is artists themselves who are principally responsible for the way in which contemporary art practice is interpreted, and art history written'.[4]

While it is arguable the extent to which artists have influence over the writing of their histories, in the case of the artists represented via the three spaces, there are clear indications that they were well aware of the impact of their actions and activities. In this sense their spaces acted as platforms to which discourse and identity could be located. While there were some attempts at framing this discourse with historical, conceptual and aesthetic tenets, ultimately all three spaces were determined by operational issues and peer networks, in relation to the cultural conditions of the time. For example Nixon's claim of Art Projects as a 'radical alternative' or Store 5's emphasis on new abstraction, can be viewed more as individual postures by dominant voices than any kind of doctrinal or programmatic approach embodied within an organisational framework.

As the publication notes, all three organizations had principals who were not only responsible for guidance and management, but also acted as central points for peer networking. Their influence on the direction and preferences of their spaces, cannot be down played even through other individuals had significant input. This is most obvious with Art Projects, through the self styled 'private gallery' nature of the enterprise, but also evidenced in the low-key contained network of Store 5 and the extended social spaces created by First Floor.

Nixon's predilection for institutional sounding names—Society for Other Photography, Institute of Temporary Art, Art Projects Annex Program—though not intended without irony, implied a proclamation of (self)importance and quasi institutional alignment. At the time these names probably carried little currency with the 'legitimate' institutions, but they would have created a certain aura amongst aficionados that has guaranteed them more that a foot note in the artist's biography. 'Nixon foreseeing the importance of demonstrating that a history of radical art existed in Australia'[5] ensured that all exhibitions were documented. Along with numerous publications solely consisting of 'artists pages' bound together, and many letters to curators and institutions, Nixon foresaw and even foretold the positioning of Art Projects and its artists within mainstream Australian art history. These connections were echoed and fostered in Art and Text magazine (est.1981), which was recognised as the 'radical' equivalent of Art Projects.

Just as Art Projects had exhibited the work of more senior artists, Store 5 opened in Melbourne in 1989 with a group exhibition that included work by Nixon. Nixon took on a mentor type role at Store 5 and exhibited regularly in the space. McKenzie mounts an argument for the artists involved with Store 5, as continuing the unfished project of modernism from a contemporary perspective with 'real, alive and present things to say'.[6] This direction also provided a logical reason for Nixon to act in a mentoring role. But it also indicated a kind of Melbourne solidarity for revamped modernist abstraction that did not

[4] Max Delany, *Pitch Your Own Tent*, Monash University Museum of Art, 2005, p.2
[5] Carolyn Barnes, Defiance as a Constructive Principle Art Projects: 1979 – 1984, in *Pitch Your Own Tent*, Monash University Museum of Art, 2005, p.10
[6] Robyn McKenzie, The Local group: Store 5 1989-1993, in *Pitch Your Own Tent*, Monash University Museum of Art, 2005, p.39

embrace the predominant trend of trans avant-garde practices based on overtly post-modern ideas.

Yet, it could be misleading to say that Store 5 solely stood for a new Australian non-representative art. Tony Clark for example, who exhibited at Art Projects, presented work that did not fit so literally into the non-representational modernist canon. Yet, his role in the network, as with many other artists involved with Store 5, overcame any differences of aesthetic preference and art historical affiliation. Tony Clark also exhibited with First Floor, making him the only artist to have exhibited across all three spaces, thereby providing a direct example of the lineage.

Clark and other senior artists taught at Victoria College, Prahran where members of Store 5 and First Floor had studied. His mentoring type involvement with First Floor was similar to Nixon's role with Store 5 and Parr exhibiting with Art Projects.

In comparison with the other two spaces, First Floor reflected a less contained approach in choosing exhibitors, symptomatic of a move a way from perceived 'house styles'. First Floor's aesthetic was more eclectic and socially expansive, while it also had a more collectivist approach to its running. Whereas, Store 5 had little engagement with self produced critical writing, First Floor represented the new Art & Text generation. Its claim of being an 'artists and writers space' ensured a direct engagement with the reinvigorated emphasis on theory and writing coming from educational institutions at the time. Self-produced writing conformed to the expediencies of the system, but it also harkened back to spaces such as Inhibodress who recognised the text as the work. Though the conceptual links had been thoroughly filtered by this point, the provision of cheaply produced hand-outs did perpetuate the ethos of the avant-garde.

If these three spaces have contributed significantly to the development of contemporary art in Australia over the last 25 years, as claimed by Delany, then they represent a particular comfortability with an art history built with market-institution affirmation in mind. They demonstrate the potency of networks and shared experience amongst artists in determining their modes of recognition. They demonstrate the potential of artist-run activity to set agendas and influence debate on what constitutes new art.

The exhibition at MUMA raised several problems in the presentation of such fluid and active histories in a museum context. Some of the work seemed to sit uncomfortably, relying on identification with the space as a housing device. Each space was defined by its location within a different gallery at MUMA. One problem is that it is impossible to replicate, to even approximate the context of this work as it was presented at the time. Not necessarily due to the specific spatial properties of the work in the actual spaces, but because the three artist-run spaces all operated within specific social, cultural and economic circumstances that have not been adequately dealt with in the exhibition. The catalogue provides a good historical narrative for the operations of the spaces, however, neither it nor the exhibition provide sufficient interpretative overlay.

There was no context for other artist-run activity occurring in Melbourne or Australia, or the industry issues the spaces confronted. In this sense *Pitch Your Own Tent* presents a discrete history that privileges the art and the career paths of the artists. Yet, I found the histories of the organizations more interesting than most of the work. This struggle between the identity of the gallery and that of the individual artists is most transparent in this kind of institutional exhibition where homogenised themes for interpretation need to be provided. There is only so much ground this type of exhibition can cover. Within its scope it has told an important and relevant story. But when one understands the challenges facing artist run spaces the package in reality is not so neat.[7]

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[7] Importantly a couple of these difficulties are raised by Tessa Dywer, D.J. Huppatz and Sarah Tutton in their text in the catalogue.

I would have liked to have seen some of these difficulties played out in the exhibition. This would have been a different kind of exhibition. It would have focussed on the role of artist-run activity as a form of social and political way finding; a way for artists to discover their place in society. But it would have given less credence to the authority of the art object and the monograph. I hope that future exhibitions of defunct artist-run spaces will activate their pasts with all the richness and playfulness they created; the uncertainty and difficulty they encountered; and the experimentation and learning they fostered.