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# critical spaces

AN ARTSPACE PROJECT

# **critical spaces**

**ARTSPACE  
FIRST DRAFT  
PENDULUM  
SELENIUM  
STREET LEVEL**

**may 4th - 28th**

**AN ARTSPACE PROJECT**

**Jay Balbi**

**Mark Brown**

**Sharline Bezzina**

**David Challinor**

**Olga Cironis**

**Tim De Haan**

**Michael Florrimell**

**William Gruner**

**Anne Kay**

**Bill Kehajias**

**Adriana Korkosova**

**Joanne Linsdell**

**Heidrun Lohr**

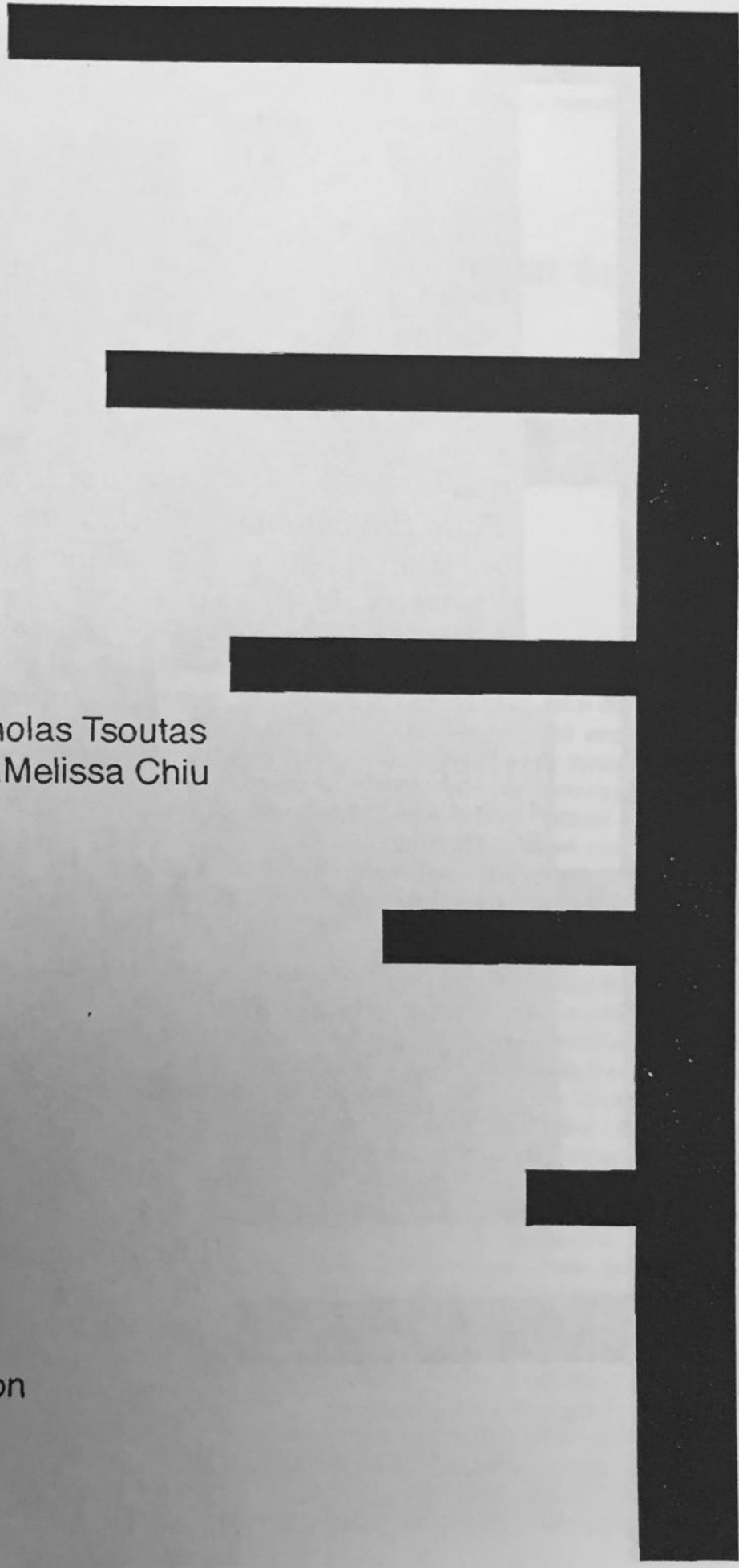
**Bruce McCalmont**

**Kim McClintock**

**Robert Pulie**

**Anne L. Rowe**

**Wayne Snowdon**



**curators**

Project curator: Nicholas Tsoutas  
Curatorial Assistant: Melissa Chiu

**Selenium**

Terry Burrows

**Pendulum**

Mishka Borowski

**Street Level**

Adam Lucas  
Con Gouriotis

**First Draft**

Leanne Barnett  
Helen Hyatt Johnston  
Jane Polkinghorne  
Sharyn Raggett  
Virginia Ross

### SELENIUM

10 Renwick St, Redfern 2016  
Thurs - Sun, 12 to 6 pm  
Ph 319 3218

#### *Echo*

Olga Cironis  
Joanne Linsdell  
Kim McClintock  
Wayne Snowdon

4 - 28 May

Opening:

*Echo Projections*

by Heidrun Lohr

Wednesday 17 May, 6-9 pm

### FIRST DRAFT

116-118 Chalmers St, Surry Hills  
2010

Wed - Sat, 12 to 6 pm

Ph 698 3665

*First Draft Interaction  
documentation archive*

Michael Florrimell

1 May

Opening Monday 1 May, 6-8 pm

### STREET LEVEL

41 First Avenue,  
Blacktown 2148  
Wed - Sat, 12 - 5 pm  
Ph 831 7754

#### *Spaces of inclusion*

Adriana Korkosova

5 May - 3 June

Opening Friday 5 May

6 - 9 pm

#### *Gap Junction Plenum*

Mark Brown

3 May - 28 May

Opening Wednesday 24 May

6 - 8 pm

### PENDULUM

7 Woodburn St, Redfern 2016

Wed - Sun, 12 to 6 pm

Ph 310 2367

#### *Grande Turismo*

Jay Balbi

William Gruner

Robert Pulie

Anne L. Rowe

4 May - 28 May

Opening Friday 12 May, 6 - 8 pm

Film screening: 'Alucinor'. A short  
film by Anne L. Rowe.

Friday 12th & Friday 26th at 6 pm.

## Critical Spaces

The canon is what gets written about, collected and taught; it is self-perpetuating, self-justifying and arbitrary; it is the gold standard against which values of new aesthetic currencies are measured. To refuse the discourse, the words of communion with the canon, in speaking of art or in the making of it, is to court the benign violence of excommunication...Victor Burgin...*Critical Spaces* provides a space for open dialogue, to throw into question how spaces generate meanings through art. Where is the culture industry grounded, who authorises and how is art authorised, legitimised, historicised?...*Critical Spaces* will examine how Artist Run Initiatives function politically as highly charged zones of contention, resistance and difference...*Critical Spaces* will analyse how those sites of exhibition and cultural practice develop their political conception of the present...how these spaces affect and politically shape and differentiate the contemporary and its processes...revealing the underlying political, social and economic agendas in play...demonstrating how political power is expressed and represented in the field by making us aware of the political climate of power which frames and inscribes the critical currency and credibility of the visual art environment. In these spaces institutionalised modes/values are distorted, decoded with critical content interrogating both the immediate substantive workings of power as well as their deeper formal logics of their authorised and legitimised representations...*Critical Spaces* creates a context whereby artist run galleries are focussed upon and scrutinised in relation to a contemporary art space such as Artspace...critically problematising the function of Artspace itself...*Critical Spaces* is predicated on the difference and diversity of practice, ideology and curatorial strategy...its multi-site objectives bring into sharp focus the very issues of the spaces themselves in relation to the workings and trappings of the art economy...what defines space...how spaces influence the process/production and indeed the selection of the work/artists and how the work is subsequently resolved in the fields of criticism and theory and what critical role do these spaces have in the processes of commodification and consumption of art...*Critical Spaces* is a highly strategic positioning of the intrinsic value of the Artist Run Initiative, provoking an intervention into and around the contributing sites...the objective is to realise an empowerment that resignifies these spaces and specific practices developed within and by these spaces...making distinctions and differences transparent...making one acutely aware that the cool value systems which diffuse the local in the homogenised ether of the general exist elsewhere...certainly someplace other than at the centre of life...art...practice...dialogue...Curated by Nicholas Tsoutas

## PENDULUM

Mishka Borowski

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Pendulum is an artist run gallery located in Redfern. The space consists of two rooms, one a five metre by six metre cube, the other five meters by eight meters-with an uninterrupted wall on one side and large windows on the other. The building faces East, so the light flooding in is ambient rather than direct sunlight. The walls are gyprock, immaculately white.

Pendulum seeks to encourage emerging artists to consolidate their position within the gallery environment by providing an accessible venue with professional administration that affords them the opportunity to concentrate on their work-practice. The emphasis is on the work produced, not the potential sale value.

The artist pays a fee to exhibit at Pendulum, and for this I provide a mailout of artists, curators and galleries, food and alcohol for the 'opening'. I also mind the space for three out of five days, document the work for a gallery archive, print the invitations and act as an administrative base for the artist.

During the month of the Critical Spaces a group show with Jay Balbi, William Gruner, Robert Pulie and Anne L. Rowe will take place. Pendulum is a gallery where artists show work that is part of an ongoing work practice, as a progression in their career rather than an end. I chose to concentrate on this aspect of Pendulum for this project and so invited the four artists to come into the space and produce the work-encouraging them to interact and even to make collaborative works. I have been involved as an overseer, briefing them on the project initially and organising the logistics.

The artists I have chosen largely because of their ongoing commitment to their work practice, their constant questioning of their own work as well as the system in which they operate. They all have a certain flexibility while still retaining their integrity. These artists have different backgrounds, ages, art educations, and are at different stages in their art careers which is quite indicative of the scope of artists shown at Pendulum.

In the months leading up to the show the artists involved and myself have held weekly meetings over dinner and a dialogue has taken place. During this process the artists have become more familiar with each other and each others work and the discussions which have arisen which have challenged and stimulated each of us. The works shown at Pendulum and Artspace have been produced during this time.

The initial motivation for the project stemmed from my fascination with the process of making art, not the technique but rather the theory and the lifestyle surrounding art making. While these are infinitely varied there are common threads. I wanted to focus on the unseen aspects of these invisible processes which are evident in finished work as an intangible sophistication. Somehow demystifying the process whilst also validating it.

This project has forced me to address a problematic inherent in artist-run-initiative of working as an artist and 'curator'. Particularly the difficulty in balancing the fine line between remaining subjective and not enforcing ones personal aesthetic and work practice, and providing practical and useful direction with an empathy only possible from another artist. The question of authorship also inevitably rears its head when artists start working together.

There are many problematics in any project which presents such a diverse range of artists and groups them with a seemingly arbitrary reason for doing so. However, it cannot fail to cause some of the vital discourse without which contemporary art could stagnate or become invisible. It is the possibility of the art being addressed which gives it reason to be displayed publicly. It certainly is not easy but it's like taking an early morning swim in the ocean.

## SELENIUM

Terry Burrows

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The gallery space that is now called Selenium began its existence in 1986 as a gallery connected to and administered by a committee of artists from the Sylvester Studio complex. It was conceived, constructed and administered by artists for artists.

It became Selenium in 1991 through this history as an artist run initiative and quite simply, the fact of its facility. By facility, I mean both the noun, as in the ex Art Unit Artist Facility sense, and the verb facilitate, as in the ease with which the space offered itself up as a site for a new project. A very useful space existed which was and continues to be partly subsidised by the surrounding studios.

By virtue of an initial committee of various artists from across the art discipline spectrum, Selenium has evolved into an installation/exhibition project space and process facility. Administered in part by myself and in part by the exhibiting artists, emphasis is on artists either individually or as a group to propose their own structure for the use of Selenium: an 'alternative' in both a political and apolitical sense of the word.

I decided to combine the desire for Selenium to participate in Critical Spaces with the gallery's usual approach to programming. A lazy curatorial decision perhaps, but one which fulfils one of the initial aims discussed, that of exposing differences and creating a dialogue of comparison between the galleries involved.

The four artists—Olga Cironis, Joanne Linsdell, Kim McClintock, and Wayne Snowdon, having already submitted a successful proposal to Selenium, were offered the possibility of incorporating Critical Spaces into their three month programme. Given the brief that their individual projects at Selenium inform their Critical Spaces contribution, they agreed that for the month of May they would view Selenium and the areas they were to utilise in Artspace as one venue.

Heidrun Lohr was invited as a photographic artist to assist in encapsulating a thematic of 'process' by utilising the camera to both collect information from the various works in process and to emphasise the potential of Selenium as an art facility. Her final contribution, although a result of this collaboration, is her own visual response to the project.



## STREET LEVEL

Adam Lucas

Con Gouriotis

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Street Level Incorporated has been operating as an artists-run-initiative (ARI) since 1988, and until recently, was the only contemporary art space in western Sydney. Initially based in Penrith, the gallery moved to Blacktown in 1990. During its operation, Street Level has sought to be as inclusive as possible in its curatorial practice. The diverse ethnicity of the West has proven to be a rich source for creative activity. As well as supporting the work of migrant and amateur artists, Street Level has deliberately sought to nurture youth and pop culture in the area, whilst continuing to provide a venue for the work of students and graduates from the Visual and Performing Arts Faculty of the University of Western Sydney (UWS).

Because of Street Level's location and its encouragement of youth and community arts, the gallery has come to be perceived as the 'poor cousin' of the inner-city artspace. But whatever the gallery may lack in financial and critical recognition, it has easily made up for in the diversity and scale of its activities. Critical Spaces provides it with an opportunity to redress some of the misconceptions and lack of awareness about those activities.

Street Level continues to bridge the gap between what has been called youth and community arts and fine art, or in a more traditional vein, between 'low' and 'high' culture. The three components of Street Level's contribution to Critical Spaces, Wave Action, Twins, and Silent Invasion are representative of the diversity of cultural expression which the gallery seeks to embrace. Aerosol artists Sharline Bezzina, David Challinor, Tim DeHaan, and Bill Kehajias first became involved with Street Level through the Suburban Wall Project, an initiative of the gallery aimed at securing sites and funds for legitimate aerosol art. Wave action is a collaborative piece between the four artists, and seeks to capture the ephemeral nature of this artform. Adriana Korkosova, a recent 'emigre' from the Slovak Republic and a Masters graduate of UWS, first exhibited at Street Level in 1994. Her work at Artspace, Twins, and Silent Invasion at Street Level, are metaphors for the social inequalities and problems of communication which are valorised by the traditional class-based distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture.

## FIRST DRAFT

Leanne Barnett Helen Hyatt Johnston  
Jane Polkinghorne Sharyn Raggett Virginia Ross

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Like most artist-run galleries, First Draft functions for the specific purpose of providing an exhibition venue which enables diversity, dialogue and experimentation, mainly through the art practice of newer artists. Like most artist-run galleries, it is firmly based in its particular niche within the gallery hierarchy, this position is known and understood by artists, the art audience, the gallery system and funding bodies.

However, First Draft has an idiosyncratic history in terms of its mode of functioning-unlike many other spaces of its kind, it experiences a kind of reconstruction every two years when it is taken over by a new group of directors. The directorial dynamism has had a potent influence on the construction of First Draft's curatorial policies and has denied the possibility of the gallery maintaining any permanent or blanket curatorial position, instead promoting an ethic of diversity and experimentation (notwithstanding that individual directorial groups might have had specific briefs about the type of art practice they wished to give attention to). Another fact colours the way that First Draft is perceived and functions-it has existed at three different locations in three very different spaces. Each change of location represents some sort of conceptual shift-and the fact of these shifts renders an understanding of First Draft in relation to one space as untenable. Instead it functions as an idea, a notion which transcends associations with any one location or architecture or ambient atmosphere. However, it is true that for each of the different spaces-Abercrombie St, Chippendale, Parramatta Road, Annandale and Chalmers Street, Surry Hills-the specific idiosyncracies have been integral to the way the spaces have been conceived and used by exhibiting artists. Gallery 2 at the current location in Chalmers St, with its roller door, large aluminium grease trap and the chemical catching indentation in the concrete floor, seems particularly to invite exhibition proposals which, presumably, would never have been received at previous locations, and vice versa. This transferability of site specificity suggests a certain transcendence inherent to the strategy of producing site specific work-it is not just about the space it functions within, it is about a general politics of space.

Perhaps it is because First Draft's evolution and construction is so tied up with concepts of location and space that our approach to the Critical Spaces project has been one which takes up, literally, the problematics of space, both materially and as a political concept. The relationship between the contemporary art space and the artist-run space begs analysis, and it is this relationship which is being explored in different ways by the artists who are 'representing' First Draft in this project. At Artspace, Bruce McCalmont will build a structure around the existing pylons in the large gallery space-appropriating and refiguring a space within the contemporary art space. Anne Kay conjures up a temporal relationship with First Draft-first by developing her weed work as exhibited at First Draft in 1994-using the plants to literally obscure the Artspace entrance-and, with Poor House, transplanting the moulded form of a fire place from First Draft's Annandale building into Artspace, a subliminal reminder, perhaps, of other spaces, other times.

Meanwhile, back at First Draft, for one night only (Monday May 1st, 6-8 pm) Michael Florrimell takes up the complexities of documentation and its role in constructing the artists, the space and the concept. His is a one day (fly by night) event which maps the territory of the empty art space, First Draft, in polaroid and video. This documentation will be incorporated into the gallery's archive. Mark Brown has positioned the artist run space, as epitomised by First Draft, between the museum and the ruin. His three week documentation of the humidity and temperature of the gallery, using a thermohydrograph (usually used in museums to maintain archival conditions) acknowledges, and charts, the existence of the negative space of the gallery, and reaches out, via a mediated sound track of the readings, across town to Artspace.

# Artist statements

## Michael Florrimell

In taking on First Draft as a space, its identity is considered – the individual or party who interacts with it and records the evidence of interaction in that space, records their work in a particular space. Via photographic documentation an artist records their activity within a space, and in questioning the recording, we may ask: where do we use it? In a magazine? A slide to show as reference or proof of participation in a space? Or do we need the record of work for other reasons? Would not the participation be enough, or is it the documentation we are interested in? My documentation for the Critical Spaces project will be donated to First Draft as a photographic recording of space and interaction which took place on 1st May 1995. First Draft is a space in time that has provided, for almost ten years, a venue for the exhibition, viewing and discussion of space, work and social interaction within its own history. May we see it expand over the next ten years with participation and support from artists, and also groups and individuals who do not normally participate in art spaces.

## Anne Kay

See (Plant material & PVA)

See is the third in a series of works using plants characterised as unwanted 'weeds'. The previous piece was worked into the mesh on the exterior of First Draft. It spoke about issues of visibility and recognition, of hidden histories and of what falls outside use-value. At Artspace, the weeds cover the glass entrance and some of the windows through which one can see into and out of the gallery. That most of these plant species go unnoticed, despite their prolifically invasive presence, calls the possibility of vision into question; pointing to vision as a culturally encoded phenomenon, predicated on hierarchical systems of knowledge, which is sometimes rendered blind.

Poor House [paper cast fireplace (middle room – First Draft [West], Annandale), cast timber, electric fan].

Architecture, usually solid and measured, becomes disconcerting when reproduced as insubstantial and quasi-animate. Paper casts, not unlike chrysalid sheddings, hold a trace, a kind of formal mnemonic which throws one back on one's own tangible materiality. The body becomes a site of recollection or recompense.

With thanks to: Rod Jacka, Sandra Cross, Lisa Kelly & Caolan Mitchell

## Bruce McCalmont

Sifting through the ashes of the barbecue, one year later. A light socket bereft of its reason, does not glow. Bale hooks, like gigantic fish hooks waver, threaten, hold forth the promise of decapitation. An eye hanging from the point of the hook, sadly focuses on its position, speculates upon the past, and yearns for its lost lids.

Computer imagery assistance: Michael Bognak.

## William Gruner

I am fascinated by the allegory of modernism, 'fashion of painting', 'aura' and a re-definement of the field via a departure from a formalist or minimalist approach. I describe my work as acceptable failures- a positivist journey into the nature of perception and the continuous and evolving tradition of painting.

## Jay Balbi

Bragis after the liver apples, a catfish I once knew was an instant cure for weariness, ill temper and failing health. It was inexhaustible, for immediately upon being placed at the table it was supplanted by its alternative. The laudable bargees being none the wiser enjoyed a cheesy grin.

## Anne L. Rowe

Nusquam tuta fides. (Our confidence is nowhere safe)

## Robert Pulie

### *Untitled*

Today we made almost \$12000 at Admissions. Isobel was standing at the door to the gallery towards the end of the day while we tallied the number. Zane called across the amount. The foyer was still crowded. It had been a busy day.

"Only two thousand" asked Isobel in disgust.

"Twelve thousand", repeated Zane.

I was on my way to the safe, just to check the float, when Isobel passed me and took most of the cash from John's till and the money in front of Simon and headed for outside. I was too shocked to do anything. I thought it was a reckless joke. Isobel had anticipated astute people in the crowd who tried to bar her way. She simply bought them over by handing out one hundred dollar and fifty dollar bills. Those who wouldn't accept the bribe were pushed aside by other eager for the money.

By the time Isobel had left the building, she was empty-handed and running and laughing and everyone else remained looking apprehensively into each other's eyes, and clutching their cash.

## Mark Brown

### *Ether / Flux* - sound from First Draft

First Draft Gallery on Chalmers Street could be located somewhere between the museum and the ruin. Its inner enclosed atmosphere, like that of all enclosed spaces, condition or unconditioned, is in eternal process. Human presence can catalyse fluctuations in this invisible process.

As a satellite or surrogate precinct of the museum, the gallery displays visible archeological, architectural history, evocative of the shattered interior of the ruin.

First Draft Gallery will be designated as a gap or junction, an enclosure in dissolve, a plenum or zone through which flows an ether that bridges architectural and ideological synapses. In this zone notions of museology and spatial poetics will be critiqued.

## Olga Cironis

### *Red Velvet Elephants*

The physicality is inescapable. The need to fondle irresistible, an atavistic desire to run your finger along the long soft trunk, to stay stock still as the pleasure hits you. The fine red velvet seduces you until the obscenely exposed orifice takes you by surprise. But, oh, the desire to feel the pressure of that passageway clamp over your hand, your arm. You regress to your own private pleasure, when suddenly you catch someone's eye. Caught red-handed.

Olga Cironis's work tries to confuse the boundaries between object and performance, by seducing the 'viewer' to physically interact with what appears at first to be a self-contained art work. With that first touch, the meaning of the work begins to unfold, as the 'viewer' becomes complicit,

betraying his or her own desires and taboos. The ambiguity of the work is carried further by the contradictory associations of the object and the manner of interaction: is it a toy? a child? an animal? a steel frame covered in foam? Is the touch a violation? an embrace? a self-controlled assessment of the object's construction? Is the 'viewer' now the 'performer' now the work of art him or herself?

Her sculptures try to rise above objectification by actively encouraging the 'viewer' to cross the line between desire and consummation. In erasing the distance between him or herself and the object, the voyeur becomes part of the spectacle.

Jacqueline Millner

## Joanne Linsdell

### *Patch*

She told me, when she was in primary school a long time ago, to learn sewing she was given a needle and thread and a patch of gingham fabric.

This patch was to be used for tacking stitch practice.

They would sew following the pattern of the fabric.

If they managed to do this neatly they would then be allowed to do a running stitch through the tacking stitch.

That was their reward.

## Kim McClintock

### *Mother Tongue*

I am interested in narrative through an account of the body as subjective experience. This narrative is not prescribed, but developed and implied through my working process and material elements.

I seek connections, feeling in the unknown space between points of knowledge, developing a personal-female expression of culture, sexuality, history and language. Through the physical presence of sculpture I attempt to position the 'I'; creating a meeting of disparate elements, the permanence of form and the fluidity of identity.

"... bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects of the very social constitution of nature itself. It is, not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body as a body of a derterminite type."

Elizabeth Grosz

Volatile Bodies 1994

## Wayne Snowdon

Wayne Snowdon's work has previously been concerned with the processes of production – from his early glue smeared newspaper collages exhibited during the mid 1980s, through to his decomposed rope and metal sculptures which were buried for months at a time at the bottom of the Hawkesbury River.

The organic materials of glass and fibre, fabric and metal, their associations with traditional sculp-

ture and with the sculptural, have been set aside in favour of the synthetic in *The tie that binds*. In fact, all the frayed edges and loose threads of his previous work have been transformed into a more palatable commodity – a spherical exo-skeleton of extruded plastic which has been moulded over rope poses as an 'artwork' and a vinyl covered sofa upon which to contemplate this artwork.

The shift in materials also marks a shift in focus from that of artistic production to artistic consumption. *The tie that binds* questions the exhibition and consumption of art, it is critical of its place and the space it occupies.

The installation comprises the very arena in which it is contained, the site of sign production enframed within the site of sign production – that is, given that the (alternative) gallery is in the arena in which the production of those signs is enacted.

Gianna Santone

Brett Smith

## **Adriana Korkosova**

When is a puppet not a puppet and not a sculpture? By placing a marionette into the context of a gallery, its original purpose is transformed and it attains attributes that are of a higher conceptual nature than those originally intended. 'High art' operates at a level beyond the physical or representational attributes of any given object. Objects are no longer representations of reality but become multi-layered metaphors in a new language of art. When 'high art' is the subject matter of 'high art', the complexities and potential paradoxes can illicit an interesting response from both an informed and uninformed audience.

With my piece *Twins* I am attempting to present the viewer with a multi-layered work that exposes the internal working of art itself. At the lowest level there are a collection of objects that can be seen as toys for children. There are two copies or twins of each object, one is destined for the high life and its sibling is destined for the low life. We are next confronted with the inequity of the presentation of the twins, one on a low pedestal and accessible to the viewer physically and intellectually, and the other standing tall on a high pedestal and in a sense out of the reach of mortals. Yet both are essentially the same and are merely projected into different contexts. This dichotomy can be experienced as both repulsive and enlightening based on the viewers' past experiences and prejudices through which they interpret the work. At another level the piece itself can be seen as a metaphor for social inequality. I hope that the audience can use the language defined in these pieces to continue the dialogue and find deeper and more complex expressions.

## **Sharline Bezzina, David Challinor, Tim DeHaam, Bill Kehajias**

Graffiti is a 'low' artform based on a mistrust and rejection of modern society and its power structure. All of us have been involved in graffiti art since we were in our early teens. Our work doesn't bow to any media hierarchy that attempts to decide whether it is suitable material to be shown in public. We do it simply because it's the way we choose to express ourselves and present our ideas. Whether the public accepts that or not isn't an issue for us.

The committed artist lives with the knowledge that at any moment s/he may be stalked, harassed, beaten, raided, charged and imprisoned because s/he engages in a practice that is regarded as unacceptable by the community. Meanwhile, advertising agencies are given free reign to inflict their sexist and discriminatory propaganda on the public every day. Likewise, state and federal governments feel justified in causing irreparable damage to whole ecosystems in order to fulfil their aims. But when a graffiti artist spray paints a decaying building or train s/he is portrayed as a criminal. Graffiti is essentially something that will only ever exist for short periods of time until it is destroyed or erased. Whether Graffiti is ever accepted as 'high art' or not is irrelevant, it will continue to exist and progress as it has done since the beginning of recorded human history.

**Ann Morrison**

## **Artists - In Space**

This text addresses the implications of the role of the artist within a threefold process of involvement within the artist-run initiative, Selenium. Firstly, it considers the process, production and impact for the artist in administering this venue. Secondly, for the artist as an individual addressing the site which may also entail operating within a group format. And thirdly, for the artist involved in the Selenium and Critical Spaces projects as an individual, within a collaborative response to a material and visual discussion of process as the intersection of points of critical engagement. I will then discuss some disparities and commonalities of the works of the selected artists and their specific engagements within the notions of process, materiality, object and installation.

To elaborate, the artist as administrator suddenly finds her/his time taken up with other artists needs leaving less time for their own work. Selenium initially operated as a committee-directed initiative with a number of participating artists and there were difficulties with co-ordinating the artists own professional schedules with the demands of sitting and administering a gallery. The process of running Selenium was fully assumed by Terry Burrows in 1993 which by then was streamlined to operate as a project, installation and process space responding to contemporary art practice needs. Upon successful application guest groups of artists became responsible for administering their own program. Terry Burrows, now acting in the role of facilitator, was able to continue his work as an artist with less interruption, thus the running of the space was adapted to suit all of the concerned artists needs.

For the selected artists this means negotiating the running of a gallery space in whichever way best suits their individual, collaborative or associative work practices. On the one hand, there is an increased demand upon their time in terms of working on advertising and openings, sitting the gallery and coordination. On the other, there is a flexible structure that enables the artists to tailor the space, their work, their time and the work's demands to their own schedules and needs. To address the needs of specifically installation and large scale work the traditional three day put-up and take down between shows, whilst a financial necessity and a tradition in many art spaces, acts to curb such projects. The Selenium project program operates as an incentive for these works (assisted by a rent subsidy from the surrounding studios) and as a pertinent response to the changing needs of art practice itself, whilst instigating changes for the profile, function and possibilities of exhibition spaces within contemporary practice. The flexible time span allows extra time

to address the immediate physicality, as opposed to the remembered impression of the site. Installation work encompasses and commands the entire space and in that it also requires that the artist respond to (and eventually the audience experience) 'non-exhibited' features such as presence, scale and the architectural implications of the site. Whether a group functions as a unity or as a set of disparate entities in Selenium is arbitrary, although a loose association to enable the smooth organisation of the program becomes a necessity as the more pragmatic details require interaction and negotiation. Some form of aesthetic, thematic or political coherence is the norm but not necessity with project or group programs which run the space over a period of two or three months. Once selected Selenium does not interfere within these processes but may suggest examples of other groups solutions and practical facilities and operations previously employed or available within the Selenium network.

A different approach was configured to the Critical Spaces project by Selenium with process set as a thematic and the photographer, Heidrun Lohr, separate from the selected group Echo, invited to participate in the project to consolidate an exploration of the artists' process in an interpretive documentation. Echo's brief, not to start a new project, rather to 'stretch' their original process and to adapt the possibilities emerging from that process to incorporate the new site and the emerging discussion related to the situatedness of that site and the attendant process. Via round-table discussion this has evolved into a more strategically team approach on both pragmatic and conceptual levels most notably with the group exhibition at Selenium which runs concurrently with the exhibition Critical Spaces. Here each of the artists simulates a column (an echo of the Artspace site) signalling the altered implications for their process in adapting the original intention of their initial Selenium proposal to incorporate not only another site but another larger project that involves the interests of many. This 'many' includes other artists, other artist-run initiatives, other writers and speakers, documentation and a publication within a discussion of the place ARI's take and make within Sydney for critical and contemporary works. The landscape is altered by the very existence of these works, with the ARI's operating in a pragmatic response to this need and then the project itself acting in recognition of the importance of this phenomenon in an Artspace initiated event. The Echo works operate within the Critical Spaces exhibition as the 'show and tell', reading as a visual representation of Selenium. However, this is deceptive as it is not the policy of Selenium to dictate a criteria of what is and what is not 'good art'. Selenium does not promote any particular aesthetic, rather it operates by calling for proposals and then selecting the strong and the probable. Neither does Selenium actively curate events or apply for funding for initiated specific projects, Echo is one of the group programs that had applied to exhibit at this time.

The four artists within the Critical Spaces project showing at Selenium Echo are loosely connected by a concern with the material, not necessarily a truth to materials, but rather a fascination with the possibility materials offer in either a symbolic, political, phenomenological or an aesthetic sense. All respect the nature of the materials they use, whether it be for their density and weight or the translucency and lightness. Their works exude a strong physicality, with a coincidental repetition of materials used occurring between them.

With such works the viewer is engaged in the corporeal arena because all sculpture in one sense is real rather than illusory by its very material presence and by the necessity of negotiating its mass within a space, it evokes a physical response, a link to the body of the spectator. The fact of the body, the fact of the work reflecting back the body and its scale, and that in turn reflecting the scale of the work to the person is very much a feature of seeing it, of experiencing it. The body takes possession of the object and the scale is felt in a relation of reciprocity, the sense of scale is a sense proper. The form is at once given configuring a dialect of object and illusion in a rejection of mimesis with the spectator in an active role as the contributor of meaning. The spectator performs as an object in a recognition of the self-contained otherness of the reality of the object/thing they are situated in physical relation to: as one object to another.

These artists work images prefaced on a recognition of the identity and function of the materials and references in the world outside of art welcoming the established emotional connections associated with the provocative contracts of materials. This process ratifies the relationship of the



object/thing with the world by using actual pieces of reality, primary elements, factual fragments that speak by the way of things in a manner that does not attempt to transcend the every day but invites those associative sensations and memories stimulated by the familiar. By including these histories the work mediates and oscillates between the simplicity of origin and a plurality of experience and interpretation, disrupting expectation. One and the same object when placed in non-similar, non-comparable contexts acquires two separate meanings. The signifier acquires a new signified that is only established by this new context, and in retaining the original signified develops a palpable texture. A delicate web of disjunctions is allowed to exist between the function of materials, their use and the historical and artistic resonances of those uses. Art work has the ability not to represent but to exist, to both affirm and deny the absolute and the fragmentary, the split between signification and experience, between meaning and being, with a deferment of any final view, an endless postponement of the completion of the meaning in a concept. In the same way these artists works affirm and deny their individual and collective identity to the two sites, the two projects and to each other as individuals and within a purportedly cohesive group process.

Joanne Linsdell's work most specifically addresses the architectural implications of the site. Her process accesses the site as the origin of the work, dictating the possibilities of what can and cannot happen whilst disorientating the vertical/horizontal hierarchy. The experienced qualities of mass, weight, gravity and illusion reveal the structures utilised within the process as the reason for being of the final product and reflect her sensibility to a sense of self, of belonging, of body in response to mass.

The absurd aspect resonates in all of this gang of four's works but with Olga Cironis, Wayne Snowdon and Kim McClintock the eros is undeniable. Their works do not investigate the formal aspects of space as much as it's signifiers in a general process of encoding.

Wayne Snowdon's work looks at the fallibility of our understandings of matter as solid, as stable, and the reality of illusion in shaping the simulacrum of our understandings of the world in a culture that privileges the visible. His wipe-me down ready for the next customer slippery sex seat sits in absurd sci-fi contradiction to the black-blurred edges of the meekly quivering air-filled fraud of mass operating as a simulation of a manifestation. What you see is not what you get.

Enticed by the sensuous and comforting rotund dimensions of a child's dream toy, Olga Cironis's velvet elephant finds the spectator touching, caressing and embedded arm-deep within the inner 'sacred' orifices of the 'blind' passive animal. Long spaces enable long objects and eight metres down that long curvaceous trunk the 'sound of touch' is revealed, a lingering audible resonance of spectators performing the act of caressing, of entering the within of another object.

With Kim McClintock a logical extension of the object is taken to an illogical extreme. In becoming useless these discarded domestic objects become self-valuable, important in their own right as a matrix of thought.

Heidrun Lohr, whilst documenting the process aspect of these works excludes the literal, the naturalistic and the informative and explodes the documentation format. In overlaying time-based images and interpreting the unspoken, she unveils her individual artistic responses to the participants and their works.

All of these artists are occupied with the dialogue between day to day experiences and the altered experiences induced by the calculations and control entailed in making a work of art. They are primarily absorbed in correlating the process of making with the process of finding meaning, and wittingly or not engaging the viewer in their own process of questioning. In displaying their 'wares', the ways of their 'wares' beings, their specificities, they deny the legitimacy of a cohesive singular absolute in their rendering of the 'natural' with a deliberated tension between the 'real' and the 'artificial', the given and the assumed. Critiquing linear codified thinking and privileging an open-ended multivalent perspective these works undermine the tyranny of coherence by creating fissures and inserting paradoxes in our habits of perception of the object. To involve the spectator in your own questioning, as Cironis's spectators find themselves intertwined in the within that becomes the without of the elephant, one may ask, just how personal can you get?

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**Kit Messham-Muir**

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## **Critical Dys-course**

**T**he proliferation of visual culture in the late twentieth century has continuously challenged art to rethink its definition. Moving away from its broad definition as an essentially aesthetic project, contemporary art is now largely perceived as a critical discourse. Clearly, criticality is a vital element of contemporary art: the discourse only remains interesting while it is animated with effective criticality. Without it, contemporary art's discourse becomes closed and static. However, 'criticality' is a slippery term, meaning any number of different things. Moreover, the specific culture of the Sydney artworld compounds this already fraught question. Almost invariably, criticality in our current conditions is garrotted by political power cables.

It is no use trying to nail down a semantic jelly such as 'criticality'. No single definition or model of criticality is truer than another. Nevertheless, there are critical models that animate the discourse, just as there are others which allow it to stagnate. Seemingly, critical engagement entails evaluation. However, I would argue that all criticism should also entail a degree of metacriticism, an active awareness of the values and criteria being applied. In the case of art reviews, this entails

being explicit about values being employed so that an audience can, in turn, engage with them.

It is often assumed that criticism must come from either an objective or a subjective position. I contend, however, that for criticism to have common value to a discourse, it must come from a position within the context of the discourse. On the objective model, the task of the critic is to achieve critical distance, and assess work according to static, supposedly neutral criteria. This model is incapable of understanding the morphic character of contemporary art. Conversely, with subjective view, a critic is to act as a translator for the artist, as though the review is the literary equivalent of the artwork. This assumes that the discourse is amorphous, that it has no common values, only interesting but unrelated contrasts. Both these models fail to address the shared critical interests, histories and traditions, which are the currency of contemporary art. I would like to argue that criticism, to be relevant, needs to situate itself within this discourse of shared meanings.

Contemporary art's discourse is not simply an exchange of fire between the poles of artist and critic. The discourse is far more complex, and the relationship between its participants are much more diverse: critical discussions are just as likely to take place amongst art students over coffee. Nevertheless, the gallery circuit and art reviews are commonly regarded as the principle sites where audiences engage in the discourse. These critical spaces significantly mould the conditions within which art is produced and engaged.

Compared to fifteen years ago, Sydney's critical print now has a fairly strong infrastructure of newspaper reviews, and national and international magazines. In the very first issue of *Art & Text*, in 1981, Paul Taylor's editorial comment expressed his frustration with the critical paucity of most of the art reviewers of that time. For instance, Taylor noted "such list-makers attribute artistic success by listing the number of exhibitions an artist has had...or by noting the number of works sold in a show. Properly speaking, such writing is barely criticism at all"<sup>1</sup>.

It is hard to tell whether we now have a greater level of critical engagement in art reviews. There are many more venues for art reviews, ostensibly opening up the flow of critical discourse. However, with greater opportunities for artists to be written about, the critical value of reviews is increasingly problematised by their value as publicity. The editorial endorsement that is stamped onto a favourable review is infinitely more valuable than any paid advertising space. In the Sydney artworld, reviews have become the currency in which egos and power cliques trade. Hence, it is not uncommon for an artist to get a reliable advocate to write their review. The resulting piece possesses the critical authority of a review, combined with the shining advocacy of a catalogue essay. This does not merely pass up an opportunity for critical engagement, but, in attempting to redefine a 'review' as a kind of advertorial, ensures dubious criticality.

Power cliques, which no doubt exist in any field, play a large and determining role in the life of Sydney's contemporary art. From the outside, it must seem an unlikely milieu in which cliques could bear any critical influence. In this field there is little to be gained in terms of finance or kudos. Yet, the potential sanctions of ostracism and retaliatory bad press assure that many reviews are never too critical. With such interests at work, there seem to be few writers immersed enough in contemporary art to understand the complexity of its discourse, while remaining critical of it. Thus, many reviews tend to be acritical, varying between hagiography and bitchery, determined by underlying allegiances.

All these factors contribute to a culture which, despite the importance of criticality to its discourse, has largely forsaken effective criticism. This retreat from criticality is well illustrated by the reaction of many in the Sydney artworld to Rex Butler's "Nixon's Watergate". Published in *Agenda*, this interrogation of John Nixon's work was powerfully critical, yet it was generally perceived that by publishing it, Butler had committed some unspeakable faux pas. It was not merely that Butler did his James Herriot to Nixon's sacred cow that seemed to cause offence. In fact Butler seems almost apologetic in his conclusion, stating "none of this says that Nixon is wrong, but rather opens his work up to discussion and debate"<sup>2</sup>. By daring to open up debate at all, Butler had somehow upset the status quo.

In stark contrast to the compromised criticality within the scene, John McDonald has attempted to

assert himself as contemporary art's renegade, ready to cut through the politics and pretension with a razor sharp critical eyeball. McDonald's contempt for "that glamorous club we call Contemporary Art"<sup>3</sup> is broad and consistent. His reviews echo Peter Fuller's haughty tone and disdain for contemporary art ("Duchamp was the start of all the trouble and there's nothing I would wish to say in his defence"<sup>4</sup>) mixed with the zealotry of an evangelical visionary. McDonald's writings descend from a lineage of connoisseur taste-masters, from Fuller and Kenneth Clark. Central to their writings is the philosophically modernist notion that all art can be empirically and objectively judged against a universal template of excellence. Thus, truly great art is made by genius masters, and the best a mere mortal can hope to achieve, is a close approximation of this ideal. Accordingly, artists who diverge from this prescribed task are deemed to be impertinent, and their work to have missed the point. This is McDonald's greatest criticism of contemporary art: that it fails to measure up against this particular criteria.

The problem with McDonald's position is that it unquestionably assumes that it is no position at all: that it is the true and correct centre, the bullseye, from which all other criteria erroneously deviate. For McDonald, this natural, universal, human aesthetic order is constantly under threat from the contaminant of low culture embodied in contemporary art. This is explicitly manifest in his Saturday reviews in the Sydney Morning Herald: "For those not inducted into the elite hierarchies of contemporary art, those without a degree in gender studies or pop culture, it must be a never ending source of wonder that art which is self-evidently bad is held to be vital and important, while art that looks pretty good is deemed inconsequential."<sup>5</sup> It is against the universal template of excellence, privy to McDonald's eye, that some work is "self-evidently bad". McDonald's verdicts offer readers no explanation of the criteria by which the work is either good or bad. Consequently, readers are offered little opportunity to engage with, or interrogate, the evaluation. With no room for negotiation, McDonald leaves readers the option either to accept his silent thumbs-down, or dismiss him altogether. It is not discourse, but monologue.

Ultimately, one has to question the value of McDonald's criticism to this particular discourse. This is not because his sympathies are not with contemporary art. Indeed, criticism made with no particular interests within the scene can be very generative. Rather, it is that with McDonald's criticism of this field, as with Fuller's, "there are two incommensurate discourses operating".<sup>6</sup> McDonald is so wilfully blind to the values specific to contemporary art that his criteria and expectations are entirely incongruous. He applies a yardstick in a metric world.

Although far from being exhaustive, these are some of the major factors which form critical conditions in Sydney. For the artists represented in the Critical Spaces project, this critical context is mainly negotiated from the circuit of artist-run initiatives (ARIs). The relation of the ARI circuit to the critical discourse is continuously changing, as is its relation to other gallery institutions. It seems that in the past, particularly during the predominance of commercial galleries in the 1980s, ARIs were run, and largely regarded, as alternative spaces. Self-marginalised, ARIs ran as a sub-culture to the wider critical discourse. Yet, more recently, both their character and their relationship to the discourse has changed.

The perception of the ARI circuit as a talent-pool for commercial galleries is no longer feasible. It is not merely that most commercial stables are full, but rather that, to many emerging artists, commercial galleries are not seen as their most likely destination. In the current impoverished art market, there are no real prospects of ever being supported by the commercial system. Consequently, the ARI circuit is experiencing a boom. To this emerging generation, artist-run initiatives are not so much alternative spaces, but a central arena of contemporary art activity, a substantive element of the discourse.

An important characteristic of ARIs is the potential curatorial independence which their non-profit status affords them. An underlying critical agenda shapes the curatorial program of any gallery. Despite having to exist on low finances, most ARIs have a degree of financial independence which other types of galleries do not have. Unlike commercial galleries, they do not have to exhibit work which is likely to sell. Therefore, the artists they show are not necessarily well known, and are freer to make unsaleable work. Moreover, most ARIs are allowed greater freedom by not hav-

ing to placate funding bodies.

The fact that ARIs are artist-run makes them a unique kind of critical institution. An ARI is often directed and run by a small group of like-minded artists with a definite, focussed notion of what their gallery represents. In addition to their curatorial autonomy, ARIs are free to adopt critical agendas based on the particular interests of the directors. Representing just four of Sydney's many ARIs, *Critical Spaces* demonstrates that each gallery proposes different forms of practice. Each holds a position in relation to the others: one gallery would seem to agree more with the propositions of some galleries, and more vehemently oppose others. Their independence allows them to declare their interests more readily. For instance, Mishka Borowski is the sole director of Pendulum, so the gallery's agenda parallels her concerns as an artist with a kind of material poetics. The works of the four artists which Pendulum represents in this project seem to take this as their main tenet. Combined with the selection of artists, the work produced often corresponds to the director's concerns.

As a consequence of their focussed agendas, ARIs characteristically have not been compelled to exhibit a broad representation of concerns. This narrowness could be seen as being negative. Indeed, in the case of an institution which is required to present a survey of artistic heterogeneity, such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales, this would amount to cultural fascism. But for ARIs, this is their most important characteristic. The current boom-time for ARIs means that there are now many galleries, with significantly different agendas. The sum of their focussed programs creates the potential for a broadly polyvalent discourse.

I have argued that criticality is a vital element of contemporary art, and that an animated, interesting, discourse depends on it. Much of our critical press fails to provide effective criticality. In Sydney, there is a need for greater criticality in both reviews and the gallery circuit. The diversity of the ARI circuit goes some way towards creating a much needed critical space.

1 Paul Taylor, "Editorial: On Criticism", *Art & Text* #1, Autumn 1981, p. 5-11.

2 Rex Butler, "Nixon's Watergate", *Agenda*, #37, July 1994, p. 9-12.

3 John McDonald, "The familiarity breeds content", *SMH*, Saturday, April 15 1995, p. Spectrum 12A.

4 Peter Fuller, "But is it art?", in Peter Fuller's *Modern Painters: Reflexions on British Art*, 1993, edited by John McDonald.

5 John McDonald, "This time it's not the Poms whingeing", *SMH*, July 23 1994, p. Spectrum 13A.

6 Ross Gibson, "Paranoid Critical Methods: A Response to Peter Fuller's *The Australian Scapegoat*", *Art & Text* #26, Sept-Nov 1987, p. 58-66.

Many thanks to Lucy Burgmann for her assistance in the preparation of this paper.

Jacqueline Millner

Something, but not critical  
*The less than intimate relationship between  
critical writing and artist-run initiatives*

I

Artist-run initiatives (ARIs), since their emergence in response to the official art world's intolerance for the experimental and genuinely irreverent, have always been battlegrounds—even their name has been the subject of heated debate over the years: alternative? collective? space? facility? Their very existence has effectively rendered them ciphers for debate around many of the critical issues affecting the production and consumption of contemporary art in Australia: Can systems be changed from the margins? How relevant is art practice to the community at large? Does dependence on government funding compromise artistic production? Should artists see themselves as businesspeople? Can art ever escape the law of the market or resist institutionalisation?

Yet, despite performing this critical function, critical credibility has often been denied artist run initiatives, certainly if their currently low profile in contemporary critical writing is anything to go by. This hasn't always been the case. The early days of First Draft, for instance, were remarkably well documented critically, even frequenting the column of Sydney critic John Macdonald. Has there been something of a sea change in the relationship between ARIs and the critical establishment since the mid-eighties?

While the identity of ARIs may be determined by the interaction of a variety of discourses—including exhibiting artists, individual directors, audience, location, level or existence of funding—the impact of criticism on that identity has rarely been subject to much scrutiny. What happens at the point where those two fraught discourses, around art criticism and ARIs, meet? How does criticism help to forge the identity of a particular ARI or ARIs in general? That today ARIs bear more of the stigma than the proud banner of marginality, that an exhibition there is more often seen as CV material, a dry run for the “real” galleries, than as an end in itself: is this partly a result of a lack of engagement by our critical establishment? That reviews of this work are not that common, or often written, at least in the journals, by less experienced writers, often friends of the artist: does this perpetuate a circumspection which could well engender mediocrity? How might a more thoughtful, committed and frank critical practice go to change the character of ARIs?

## II

The *raison d'être* of most ARIs is accessibility, “to seek a wide range of curatorial policies and proposals for exhibitions and events; to stimulate the development and presentation of a variety of artworks” as set out in First Draft's constitution for example. First Draft advertises for proposals and ends up accepting roughly between 50% and 75% of these. While the directors look for quality of concept and execution, their curatorial policy aims at diversity and inclusiveness. In a gallery program, diversity in media, aesthetic properties and inevitably in artistic impact can often be read negatively by critics as inconsistency and irritating incoherence. On the other hand, consistency is seen to design a signature for an ARI, to render the space a definable entity which the critic can grasp easily. The praise Sydney critic Felicity Fenner had for one ARI precisely for its consistency<sup>1</sup> suggests that severely limiting the range of work and artists exhibited can be a real winner.

The qualities of the ARI itself, especially the space, can also be implicated in this impression of irresoluteness, as with Fenner's disparaging reference to First Draft's rear gallery as “the dark [damp]... cement cell”<sup>2</sup>. To sleight an ARI space for lack of finish is missing the point entirely. Since their inception most ARIs have welcomed the physical transformation of their spaces, and resisted the temptation to become precious about those often hand-rendered and self-gyprocked white walls. While Terence Maloon's observation that “cleanliness, elegant presentation, professional management...dominate today's alternative spaces [so that they] differ from what they are supposed to be alternative to only insofar as they are younger and more down-market”<sup>3</sup> might ring true to a degree, no doubt their malleability, or their insistent site specificity, remain great assets to ARIs. Think about the radical difference in meaning between Linda Sproul's original proposal for The White Lady 4 to the IMA, which featured a prize bull alongside Sproul herself inside the performance space, and the actual performance at the AGNSW, where restrictions by the trustees resulted in the bull being tethered at the gallery's entrance, a long way from the ethereal atmosphere of the nineteenth century wing at twilight. Similarly, the industrial redolence of First Draft's rear gallery, or the subterranean darkness of Melbourne's Basement Project are palpable reminders that no space is ever neutral. Why should we equate the commercial white cube with critical credibility?

Another bankable critical commodity of course is “names”. Some ARIs, it appears, believe that a good number of established artists on their programs—to shake off the perception of being a space for rent by those who can't get a free gig elsewhere—scores on critical kudos. Undoubtedly, to juxtapose ingenuousness and experience might evoke a frisson or two, but the compulsion to evidence a space's critical edge with the participation of reputable artists could also be read as a lack of confidence in the calibre of ARIs' bread-and-butter, emerging artists. In the push towards “professionalism”, the exigencies for the establishment of ARIs have often been forgotten.



Inconsistency and shoddiness appear to alienate some critics. What of the individual works on their own terms? On the rare occasion that works exhibited in an artist run initiative do get a "major" mention, say in *The Herald*, *The Australian* or *Art & Text*, the "critical" glance is often cursory: a footnote to a feature review (as in Felicity "margin surfer"<sup>5</sup> Fenner's "Critic's Choice"), a weak attempt at some crotchety old humour (as in Elwyn Lynn's reference to *Pendulum* in terms not of its work but of its not very elderly-friendly staircase) or perhaps a casual citation to add some substance to yet another critic's overweening slant on "the next big thing" (such as "avant-grunge" or "the new abstraction").

Reviews as such are rarer still, but when they do crop up, say in the less prestigious journals, the writers tend to be "emerging" talent themselves, often compromised as much by their personal relationships with the artists as by their lack of experience and their career ambitions. Have "ambitions... become still more destructive of honesty in those who would be critics"?<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that relatively untried writers cannot provide artists with cogent and elucidating critique; rather, it is to lament the paucity of high profile writing in this area. Such a presence might help set a climate of critical inquiry so as to avoid the tendency either towards simple mutual self-promotion—"you write about me and give me profile", "I write about you and give myself profile"—or a self-indulgent wallow in mediocrity.

Artists should moreover demand critical acuity of prospective writers, and not settle for a mere transcription of their own intentions or a grammatically correct description of their works' appearance. Of course, this requires openness on both sides. Some journals, such as *Eyeline*, require illustrations with all contributions, including reviews. Now, would many artists volunteer slides of their work in the knowledge that a review might be other than a promotional puff? We all know that (the few) influential artists can pretty much veto who gets to write about their work by simply refusing copyright permission for the reproduction of images.

So why such a lack of critical appraisal of ARI work? It seems the critical establishment waits for the default judgement of public institutions before crediting the work of new artists. Once Artspace or ACCA or IMA take the risk, only then is the work worthy of comment, only then has it achieved some critical credibility. Is there a fear of picking out "artists to watch" too early? It may be a risk to single out an inexperienced artist for serious critical consideration, given the pressures on art writers and editors to substantiate their judgements with career successes down the track. Yet, I would argue that it is often precisely at these tender, tentative moments that genuine critical engagement—something other than a dealer casting a commercial eye over a portfolio—is of immense value.

As for the quality of the work, surely a critical consensus that ARI work is below par is unsustainable given the role these spaces play in the art world hierarchy, feeding the dealers and museums with new talent?<sup>7</sup> Then again, if there is a sense of poor quality, doesn't turning a blind critical eye merely perpetuate this? There appears to be a policy amongst some reputable critics to "diplomatically" avoid the bad, on the grounds that it would be cruel to focus on trashy work. But, this begs the question, what makes for trashy work? Should not this be an open debate, and not an issue that gets decided behind editorial doors? In some respects, this phenomenon is reflected in the fact that quite often, one will not actually read the reviews of shows, but merely ascertain who has been reviewed in order to keep that finger on the pulse—not a very happy state of affairs. The other argument that's often raised is the need to treat new artists with kid gloves, lest you rain on their parade before they get a chance to blaze in full regalia. Good criticism is not destructive, but circumspection can be. As it is, the circumspection of peers and even art school teachers is often deafening.

## IV

Could the lack of critical engagement with work by emerging artists betray a larger problem with critical writing about the visual arts in general? Now, there's a hoary old issue. Back in the 70s, the publisher of the short-lived Art-Network, Peter Thorn, railed against Art & Australia for being "complicit in promoting a fear of criticism" and "unwilling to engage in critical debate". "By excluding polemical texts, by excluding whole sections of the art community [Art & Australia had] fostered a twenty year history of non-interrogative art criticism and critical neglect".<sup>8</sup>

Art & Australia is probably an easy target. Perhaps that non-interrogative and exclusive history lives on in our self-avowed cutting-edge journals. How much of the writing there is more documentary and descriptive, rather than analytical and evaluative, how much a lip service to current theoretical issues rather than a critical exploration of them in terms of work being produced and exhibited? Sometimes, this rarefied atmosphere can render the critic blind to, or worse, intolerant of, work which does not seek to locate itself according to theoretical rubrics with which the critic is familiar. Purely descriptive writing also does little to add grist to the mill of aspiring artists.

No doubt, the pendulum has been slowly swinging away from critical writing stultified by the terminal self-reflexivity of poststructuralist theory and its concern with the impossibility of authorship, to a more meaningful approach better grounded in the materiality of the art object. The challenge that must be tackled is to bring theory to bear in a practical way on understanding both art works and the minutiae of everyday life in general, or as Rex Butler urges, art criticism should concern itself with how to make the work of art "do something, how to make it introduce a kind of difference into the way we live and think".<sup>9</sup>

By putting theory to the use-value test, critics are much less likely to be cowed into complicity with work which says absolutely nothing to them. Moreover, they may see the value of putting their opinions to a wider public, beyond the initiates of artspeak. Having a broader repertoire from which to draw in writing about art might also lessen the temptation to bring that readymade analytical tool to any work one is asked to review. These developments may go to facilitate greater critical engagement with the diversity that is ARI work. Thankfully for ARIs, the debate over art criticism is far from over.

1CBD, in "When bad means good" Sydney Morning Herald 15 July 1994

2ibid

3Terence Maloon, "What Images Return?" in Final Verse: Art Unit 82-85 Art Unit 1988

4Linda Sproul The White Lady performed as part of Perspecta 1995 at the AGNSW February 1995

5Shaun Davies "Condition Critical" Real Time 5 February 1995

6Christopher Allen "John, Nick etc" The Sydney Review August 1994

7Judy Annear "The Changing Nature of ARSs and CASs" Hindsight Forum First Draft 1986

8Michael Denholm "Australian art magazines: the last thirty years" Art Monthly 77 March 1995

9Real Time 6 April 1995

**Adam Lucas**

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## **Spaces of Inclusion: embracing cultural difference in western Sydney**

**T**he questioning of traditional divisions between high and low culture, and the celebration of diversity and difference are persistent themes in postmodern cultural theory. By virtue of its location as one of the only contemporary art spaces in Western Sydney, Street Level provides an outlet and focus for a multiplicity of creative activities and practices, and can in many ways be seen as a microcosm of postmodern culture.

Street Level has been operating as an artists-run-initiative (ARI) since 1988. It was founded by Kate Soady, Diane Wallace, Atina Hirstic and Albie Viegas, who were at the time visual art students from the University of Western Sydney. Initially based in Penrith, the gallery moved to Blacktown in 1990.

During its operation, Street Level has sought to be as inclusive as possible in its curatorial practice. As well as supporting the work of local migrant and amateur artists, Street Level has deliberately sought to nurture youth and pop culture in the area, whilst continuing to provide a venue for the work of students and graduates from the Visual and Performing Arts Faculty of the University of Western Sydney (UWS). More recently, the gallery has begun occasional exhibitions of the work of artists from outside the region.

Because of Street Level's location in the poorest local government area in Sydney, and its encouragement of youth and community arts, the gallery has come to be perceived as the "poor cousin"

of the inner-city artspace. But whatever the gallery may lack in financial and critical recognition, it has easily made up for in the diversity and scale of its activities.

Last year, the gallery organized twenty-six exhibitions, five music and art performances both on- and off-site, two lectures, three workshops and an eastern states lecture tour by two international artists, all on a budget of about \$40,000. These activities included a tour of local aerosol artists and funk and hiphop bands for the Sydney Festival and Carnivale curated by Street Level's director, Con Gouriotis, and all-ages hiphop and punk gigs at Street Level organized by music coordinator Evonne Borg. Special projects coordinator David Cranswick also organized one of Triclops International's first public performances, "Molten Godhead", opposite the new casino site at Pymont, which was featured on SBSTV's "Imagine". The gallery also provided facilities for West Ryde Community Access Centre, working with disabled people, and continues to assist local aerosol artists in securing funding for materials, as well as legitimate sites to produce their work, through the Suburban Wall Project.

Street Level bridges the gap between what has been called youth and community arts and fine art, or in a more traditional vein, between "low" and "high" culture. The three components of Street Level's contribution to Critical Spaces, "Wave Action", "Twins", and "Silent Invasion" are representative of the diversity of cultural expression which the gallery seeks to embrace.

But this is just the public face of this artists-run-initiative. Although Street Level has managed to maintain an extraordinary level of activity over the years, it has been doing so within the context of minimal finances and a huge amount of volunteer work. Consequently, it would seem instructive to step behind the scenes and take a look at some of the broader issues surrounding the basic administration and financing of such a contemporary art space.

In the same way that other areas of social service and public expenditure have been softened up for funding cuts by the econocrats of the New Right, the premise that cultural organizations should seek to lessen the fiscal burden on governments by seeking corporate or business sponsorship has been used to rationalize smaller and smaller arts budgets. But the reasoning which seeks to justify this situation is flawed from two perspectives. Firstly, it assumes that arts organizations should take responsibility for generating revenue that the government no longer deems is its responsibility to supply, and secondly, it assumes that reduced government expenditure in cultural activity can be offset by private sponsorship in an unproblematic way.

To accept this premise is to accept that the government is acting justly when it continues to reduce public expenditure on aspects of the economy that capital never has had any interest in maintaining. In fact, in the case of many forms of cultural expression, business and industry does see in their interest to marginalize or silence those forms which question their legitimacy. Hence the increasingly biased and uninformed posturing that masquerades as public debate in the mass media, and the theoretical obscurantism that masquerades as "major" contemporary art.

Even in those cases where private capital doesn't directly influence cultural activity in adverse ways, having to cater to commercial sponsors who provide major contributions to a particular organization compromises the autonomy of that organization, no matter what its administrators might say. Australia is notorious for having a particularly conservative and anti-intellectual business culture. Although it is possible for ARI's to secure private sponsors, it is a difficult and time-consuming process, simply because the representatives of high culture i.e. ballet, opera, symphony orchestras and high-profile contemporary and performing arts institutions are their most favoured choices for beneficence. If you're an ARI or a regional or community-oriented space then all you can realistically expect from expending considerable effort is a number of small contributions.

Although the Federal Government likes to make positive noises about promoting cultural diversity and contemporary art, the fact is that the traditional class-based distinction between high and low culture continues to be upheld by state and federal governments and private sponsors, who do not put their money where their mouths are with regard to the maintenance of diversity and difference in cultural practice. Perhaps this is not surprising in a political atmosphere in which cultural value is determined by "what the market will bear", rather than by traditional notions of social justice or

ethical considerations of the intrinsic value of promoting cultural diversity.

Yet despite the constant erosion of democratic ideals and the public sphere by the so-called "free marketers", it would seem that the cynicism of postmodern discourse towards political struggle has rendered any resistance to these incursions virtually mute. Nevertheless, the significance of these trends for arts organizations in Australia is clear. State and Federal Governments will focus cultural expenditure on activity with a high public profile and those areas seen as having a commercial potential; the rest will get the crumbs, and that may or may not include ARI's.

According to a recent survey published in Artswest, although Western Sydney contains 42% of Sydney's population, it is only receiving about 11% of state and federal arts funding allocated to the whole of Sydney. This is obviously a grossly inequitable situation and one that needs to be looked at carefully by funding bodies. If we look at Street Level's record, however, the gallery appears to be doing better than these figures would seem to indicate. For example, of twelve grants applied for last year, Street Level received four, which amounted to about two-thirds of the gallery's running costs. But although this hit-and-miss ratio is roughly the same as the proportion of grants given out by the Australia Council relative to the number of applications they receive, each of these grants takes at least one week for one person to prepare. In some cases, they take up to four or five weeks of preparation. Even if we take the minimum preparation time for a single grant as an indicator, this still amounts to about three and a half months work for one person, just to prepare grant applications! This gives some idea of the amount of work involved in maintaining an ARI like Street Level.

A growing awareness of these political realities by Street Level board members has necessitated the development of a range of strategies which attempt to alleviate the detrimental effects of such trends. Primarily, it has necessitated a focus on strengthening the gallery's ties with local government and other regional cultural organizations and galleries.

For example, Street Level has been developing a close relationship with Liverpool Council and Casula Powerhouse over the last couple of years. Liverpool Council helped finance the Survival Research Laboratories Workshop and Lecture Tour, and Casula Powerhouse hosted the opening for the tour, which featured a performance by Triclops International in what was then an unfinished site, as well as an Australian premiere of Leslie Gladso's documentation of SRL's latest San Francisco show, "A Calculated Forecast of Ultimate Doom: Sickening Episodes of Widespread Devastation Accompanied by Sensations of Pleasurable Excitement". Liverpool Council's Cultural Planner at that time, Susan Conroy, was also a speaker at The Mutating City forum which concluded the SRL workshop. Other collaborative projects are still being developed, including plans for an exhibition for young people of woman artists working with new technologies. This is intended to be the first of a series of projects aimed at educating young people in Western Sydney about contemporary art.

Street Level has also had some success with Blacktown Council in terms of negotiating a potential site for a new cultural space for Street Level, as the gallery's current site has been for sale for the last twelve months and is consequently no longer secure. Street Level board members David Cranswick and John Cheeseman have met with architects from the Ecodesign Network based at Sydney University, which includes world leaders in ecologically sustainable design techniques, to discuss the possibility of involving them in the design of an eco-artspace for Street Level. Part of the brief discussed with Blacktown Council was that the new space should be a landmark building using contemporary ideas on energy conservation, building materials, design and construction techniques. Street Level hopes to be able to work with local community groups, schools and individuals for participation in the design and construction of the building.

The gallery has also been involved in "Six of the Best" since the middle of last year, a joint marketing project which includes Boomalli Artists' Cooperative, First Draft, Artspace, the Performance Space and the Australian Centre for Photography. Part of this initiative includes the Artbus, which is a free service for patrons that tours a number of different galleries every Saturday. Street Level's first visit by the Artbus was during the Survival Research Laboratories Workshop, and

included an impromptu performance by Rod Nash of one of his walking machines inside the backspace of the gallery.

Over the course of this year, the backspace of the gallery has been renovated and opened for exhibitions, and board members have decided to make the gallery spaces free, in order to combat the continuing trend towards artists having to pay to exhibit their work. Street Level is also now on the Internet, courtesy of the University of Western Sydney and Westnet Community Access Electronic Network, which is based at Tri Community Exchange in Penrith. The gallery has a newsletter posted on WESTNET, and hopes to expand its presence in cyberspace over the coming months.

Given the demands on volunteer staff which such a busy schedule entails, the exigencies of having to maintain an income for individual staff members can create considerable problems. It is one thing to voluntarily take time out of waged work to pursue your own work and not to get paid for it, but it is an even greater sacrifice to do it on another's behalf. Although valuable expertise is gained in understanding the processes of curatorial and administrative organization, it's not always clear whether this will translate into paid employment, especially when voluntary involvement may extend over a period of years. As Anne Morrison has pointed out, these demands on the participants' time serves to reduce the amount of time spent on pursuing your own creative practice. This can be particularly frustrating when all of your efforts for years at a time are spent just trying to maintain the gallery's basic functions and the finances to keep everything going. It's no wonder then that people suffer from burnout after a fairly short time and abandon their involvement when the workload becomes overwhelming, or financial and other external exigencies overrule.

It is an indictment of the current funding arrangements that an artists-run-initiative like Street Level has operated successfully for seven years, but still has no guaranteed funding to maintain its existence. It is even more disturbing that so much unpaid labour should be involved to provide what can be seen as essential services for sustaining cultural activity in the West. Without Street Level to serve it, this diversity of practice would have great difficulty in finding expression. Surely it should be possible for smaller arts organizations that have been in existence for a certain amount of time and have sustained a certain level of activity to get guaranteed funding at a reasonable level relative to their annual financial turnover.

Street Level has played an important role in the cultural development of Western Sydney, and is well-recognized within the region for being an innovative and committed organization. If the gallery is to maintain its current level of activity, and hopefully expand that activity, then it is going to have to secure a more reliable source of funding than the régime under which it is currently operating. Although Street Level board members have done their best to keep the space going, there is only so much they can do.

Given the current situation with regard to funding, and some of the problems outlined in this forum, it would seem that there is a good case for ARI's to be receiving more government support than they are at present. Alleviating the balance of payments is not a sufficient reason to cut expenditure in any area of the public sector. It is a fact that cultural industries generate over 8 billion dollars per year for the Australian economy. If state and federal governments are serious about maintaining cultural diversity and developing Australian culture in the long-term, then they are going to have to invest more money in the future of Australian art. That future is exemplified by the work of artists-run-initiatives.

**Critical  
Spaces  
Forum**

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**Sunday May 28  
1pm**

**at Artspace**

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**Peter Anderson  
Colin Hood  
Jacqueline Millner**

With a panel  
discussion by the  
Directors of the artist  
run spaces and the  
writers for the Critical  
Spaces project.

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# Critical Spaces Artspace Program

## FIRST DRAFT

**Anne Kay**

*See* [plant material & PVA] and Poor House [paper cast fireplace (middle room First Draft [West], Annandale), cast timber, electric fan].

**Bruce McCalmont**

*untitled*

Computer imagery assistance: Michael Bognak

**Mark Brown**

*Gap Junction Plenum*

## PENDULUM

**William Gruner**

GT designed by Jay Balbi, GT designed by Robert Pulie,

GT designed by Anne L. Rowe

**Jay Balbi**

*Cat Proverbs*

**Robert Pulie**

*untitled*

## STREET LEVEL

**Adriana Korkosova**

*Twins*

**Sharline Bezzina, David Challinor, Tim De Haan & Bill Kehajias**

*Wave Action*

## SELENIUM

**Joanne Linsdell**

*Patch*

**Wayne Snowdon**

*The Tie That Binds*

**Kim McClintock**

*Mother Tongue*

**Olga Cironis**

*untitled*

Special thanks to Peter Willersdorf, Michaelie Crawford & Frank Holmes

**Heidrun Lohr**

*untitled*



# Critical Spaces Artist Run Initiative Program

## FIRST DRAFT

Michael Florrimell  
*First Draft Interaction documentation archive*

Mark Brown  
*Gap Junction Plenum*

## SELENIUM

Olga Cironis  
Joanne Linsdell  
Kim McClintock  
Wayne Snowdon  
*Echo*

Heidrun Lohr  
*Echo Projections*

## PENDULUM

William Gruner  
Rupture  
Terra-Sublimus  
Ornament 2  
*Where There's Smoke There Is Fire...(in the House Of New Theory)*

Jay Balbi, William Gruner, Robert Pulie, and Anne L. Rowe  
*Drawings*

'Alucinator' A short film by Anne L. Rowe  
Screening at 6pm Friday 12th May and Friday 26th May

## STREET LEVEL

Adriana Korkosova  
*Silent invasion*

# A R T S P A C E

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Director: Nicholas Tsoutas

Curatorial assistant: Abby Mellick

Catalogue design: Anna Sabiel

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