

## **THE PRACTICE OF AN ARTIST RUN ORGANISATION (conference paper Inbetween, Seoul, 2004)**

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From the inside the making of history is irrelevant and therefore when I come to write about what West Space has achieved over the last 11 years I find myself thinking in the present, thinking about the issues West Space is currently negotiating. Clearly these issues have a strong bearing on what has proceeded, but it is the ongoing imagining of what West Space is about and what it is trying to achieve that occupies my headspace. This attitude is partly reactive to what is happening at the moment, but it is also propositional as we attempt to ensure that West Space charts its development as a pioneer of untried practices for artist run organizations in Australia.

In this paper I will describe some of these proposals that constitute what I call the practice of an artist run organization. These proposals have an ideological base that is formed and continues to be formed from the experiences of the organization, accompanied with my own learning and professional experiences. Yet I will attempt to apply practical examples or possible ideas for implementation of these ideological propositions.

Before I begin I will clarify what I mean by the 'practice of an artist run organization'. In literal terms this phrase attempts to equate an individual's art practice with that of an organization run by artists. It suggests that the collective nature of an artist run organization is akin to a collaborative art practice. Using categorical methods of comparison the outcomes may be considered different, but the process and thinking methods bound up in the day-to-day operations of an artist run organization are not dissimilar from those of a collaborative group of artists. You may ask how can an organization think in the same philosophical, critical and creative ways to that of an artist, and most importantly with the same independence? Yet from my experience with West Space it is precisely the ability of artists to bring their same thinking processes that they use in their work to the running of an organization that makes artist run spaces unique and different to other gallery models. So the points below will be conflating the idea of an art practice into an organisational practice as a means of trying to unravel just why artists find these collaborative enterprises so critical for contemporary art.

### **1. The ideology of difference**

*I will consider the importance of ideology in shaping the idea of alternative and how West Space has claimed a space of difference through various debates over the years.*

In the 1970's the term 'alternative spaces' was used to describe organizations that were non-commercial, running parallel to the commercial galleries. In Canada this very term 'parallel galleries' meant the same as 'alternative spaces'. Both these terms included artist run organizations and public or government supported spaces. In Australia these government supported spaces became known as Contemporary Art Spaces in the early 80's. This division was bitterly contested by artist run organizations at the time because they realised that they were being shut out of the newly developing national funding picture that was building the contemporary art space infrastructure. 'The fact that the VAB's development of detailed policy in the alternative spaces area was not initially formulated in a unified way, but divided by the headings CAS and ARS, appears to have compounded the problem' (Anderson, 1989)

So the categories of Contemporary Art Space and Artist Run Space (now often replaced by Artist run Initiative) have been cemented through defined funding programs with specific funding criteria supported through a national policy framework (i.e. a maximum number of CAS that can be sustained in each city). Out of these debates from the early 80s also grew a politicisation of artist organised activity. As funding bodies became more bureaucratic and CAS defined their role as key organizations (no longer alternative art spaces), artist run organisations claimed their potential as genuine 'alternatives' to Contemporary Art Spaces.

Nowadays our differences to commercial galleries are self evident; we exhibit work by less established artists, we exhibit more experimental work, we have no interest in selling work and do not take commissions, we are administered by artists. But our difference to Contemporary Art Spaces is not so clear. Sure we don't have guaranteed ongoing government funding and we have much smaller operating budgets, but how are the artistic programs of artist run organizations different to those of Contemporary Art Spaces? This is a difficult question because on face value they may not appear to be very different at all, but the processes we go through in initiating and co-ordinating our programs are different. Moreover the reasons for establishing an artist run organisation and presenting our programs may be very different.

"There is a fundamental ideological difference between West Space and the governing authorities that can never be bridged: we believe that artists need to be in control of their professional circumstances and means of representation. In a literal sense, this is impossible due to the divisions of specialist labour in capitalist society, but it also represents an ideal that speaks about artist activity striving to be independent of prescribed socio-political agendas and dominant-political codes". (Jones, 2004)

I wrote this in early 2003 for the West Space ten year book, *Formation and Form*, due to be published in June this year. It is of course a totally utopian idea that artists can somehow manage the 'artworld', and one could argue somewhat naïve to suggest that artists running the governing authorities would not be encumbered by (other) political agendas. However the point is made more as a means to ensure that West Space stays true to its belief that artists have the right of self determination for their practices. To what degree this self determination can be exercised is not the point, the point is that artist run organizations have an inbuilt responsibility as a collaborative practice by and for artists.

Artist-run spaces themselves have divergent practices. West Space does not see itself within a lineage of artist run spaces that are based on house styles or contained networks. And while West Space may be the most successful artist run organization in Australia, not all spaces want to (nor should they) replicate our belief systems or operating model.

## **2. Perpetually Emerging**

*Artist run organizations are often pigeon-holed as spaces that primarily cater for emerging artists, yet we can turn this term around to discuss the idea of continual formation as a powerful tool for invention and experimentation.*

Artist run spaces are often seen by funding bodies as radical incubators for contemporary art, project based (and subsequently short term in nature), and primarily there to cater for emerging artists. This pigeon-holing clearly locates artist-run organizations as feeders for the larger organizations. Artists may indeed exhibit with artist run spaces before showing in museums and state galleries, but they may also continue to exhibit in various areas of the sector including commercial galleries, public galleries, contemporary art spaces, public spaces and artist-run spaces.

The various areas of the visual arts sector offer differing exhibition experiences and opportunities. Most may be better resourced than artist-run spaces but artist-run spaces have distinct features that cannot be replicated.

If we turn around the government inscribed definition of artist-run spaces primarily catering for emerging artists, to the idea that the organization is perpetually emerging, then we shift the emphasis onto the collective entity. This imbues the organization with its own sense of practice. And this practice should necessarily be one that is in a constant process of formation because if it is not, then it may be merely replicating larger organizational structures on a micro level, which would be counter to the idea of a critically engaged art practice. In other words, the practice of an

artist-run organization needs to recognise itself in a constant process of emergence so that it remains true to its own management and constituency; artists.

This will mostly happen organically in any case, but as artist-run spaces build larger administrative structures, they must be weary of becoming less flexible and responsive to what artists desire and need. This will create tension and disagreement because the funding bodies may require the organization to be more answerable and therefore develop more protocol and policy, yet this infrastructure may also irrevocably shift the values and beliefs of the organization. At some point the organization may choose to become a different kind of organization, completely breaking with its artist initiated roots, while others may use this tension to stimulate debate and creative outcomes.

### **3. Radical Spaces**

*Can we challenge the idea of art as a product and instead see it as a 'form' that constantly evolves in the same way language evolves? Does the notion that the art will always and should be in formation reflect the goals of West Space?*

Artist-run organisations need to transform their models of operation, adapt to changing social/political/economic climates or close down. In some ways they are more exposed to trends and the vagaries of taste than others, but they are also independent enough to form their own critical spaces with indifference to market and institutional pressures.

I am interested in the idea that 'form' can be applied to any creative manifestation. This idea emerged after an exhibition in 2001 known as the Office of Utopic Procedures; "If we substitute the word 'form' for 'work' (as in artwork), we can begin to recognise the potential for critical propositions to radicalise conventional notions of 'art'. As a series of conjectural forms—physical manifestations, text, dialogue and concepts—this project makes no attempt to prioritise or privilege action over object, and concept from execution." (Jones, 2002)

This is not a new idea, it is really just recognising that what comes out of artist-run organizations is not just 'artwork' but more generally and in a way more importantly, discourse and experience. Discourse is imbedded in language, and as discourse changes, so to can the language that it uses communicates. Moreover the way one experiences and engages with the discourse may be through a variety of channels other than exhibiting or looking at work.

At West Space two of our focus areas for generating discourse are publishing and international exchange. Both these are forms of practice for West Space that engage many people though different types of experience.

### **4. Constituents**

*Artists are West Space's core constituents. Do any other audiences matter, and if so what roles do they play? How important is a sense of community to artist run organisations?*

Funding bodies are always wanting to know how we intent to expand our audiences and reach new audiences. Audience development has become a key policy area for funding agencies to be answerable to government for the use of public funds i.e. tax payer dollars.

However, I often wonder how important broad and large audiences are to a small visual arts organization such as West Space. I have heard it said by some artist-run spaces that the only audience that matters are their friends. This is a bit disingenuous because I know they would also like to count curators, writers and gallery directors among their potential audience. Other spaces have been more specific such as Art Projects which operated in Melbourne from 1979 –1984. They made sure the right people came through the door; that was the audience that mattered to them.

Our main audience are more than just viewers; they are our constituents, artists. Artists visit the gallery to support their peers and stay in contact with what is happening. The same artists may also exhibit at West Space or have been involved in publishing or other projects. They may be current committee members or former committee members. So the inherent networking that artist-run organizations produce is enormous. Artists are the core constituents for artist-run organizations because they are involved at all levels from initiation, co-ordination, administration, presentation/exhibition, viewing, decision making and support. The success of an artist-run organisation is largely dependent on how true it is to its constituents; artists.

Of course other audiences are important, but they will flow from the artists networks and supporters. And artists have many different kinds of supporters, not just other artists. It is these secondary networks that artist-run organizations could build on further. West Space does not have any budget for marketing or publicity campaigns, we rely on the best publicity you can't buy; word of mouth. Sometimes called 'loyalty marketing' or 'whispered marketing' (as in Chinese Whispers), recommendations through person to person communication is a kind of unsolicited advertising that money can't buy.

However, there is a connection between how well the organization is resourced and the kind of experiences that artists and audiences will have. Since we have had a full time paid position at West Space, it has made a big difference for administrative efficiency, the production of more ambitious projects and public interface. In general the organization now has a more stable and professional public face. Though, it must be stated that for our first seven years of operation West Space was run on a completely voluntary basis.

## **5. Answerability and responsibility**

*How do artist run organisations respond to their sponsors and funding agencies? Conversely, what kind of responsibility to funding agencies have to artist run organisations?*

Since becoming a more professional organization with a larger budget, issues of answerability and responsibility have become much more pronounced. In particular funding bodies require more detailed and developed information in funding applications and their subsequent acquittals. This is commensurately justified because as the amount of money we receive increases, so do the checks and balances. But what we have found with one of our funders is the requirement for more business orientated information in the funding application. For example we are required to have a detailed business plan. We are also obliged to develop a business case proposal to find corporate partners. This has been a worthwhile process as it is building a stronger organization, but it has to be approached very carefully as the organization must not lose sight of its core values.

In terms of infrastructure to how the Experimental Art Foundation began in 1974, but West Space has the advantage of hindsight, and the disadvantage of a leaner and more competitive funding environment. Yet, from our experience and knowledge we know what kind of organization we do not want to become; a Contemporary Art Space. So in Australia we are pioneering a new model for an artist-run organization. This model is not new to countries such as Canada who have had paid staff and paid artists exhibition fees for many years. But in Australia, artist-run spaces have run on volunteer time and energy, while charging artists fees to exhibit. West Space hopes to create a benchmark for artist-run spaces in Australia, arguing by example that artists must be properly recognised and remunerated for their involvement with such spaces. We believe the practice of an artist-run space can be the best means of politicising the practices of artists on creative and practical levels. For this reason alone they are indispensable. They conflate the economic conditions of the space with those of the artist, highlighting the inequities that need to be addressed.