Shown by us

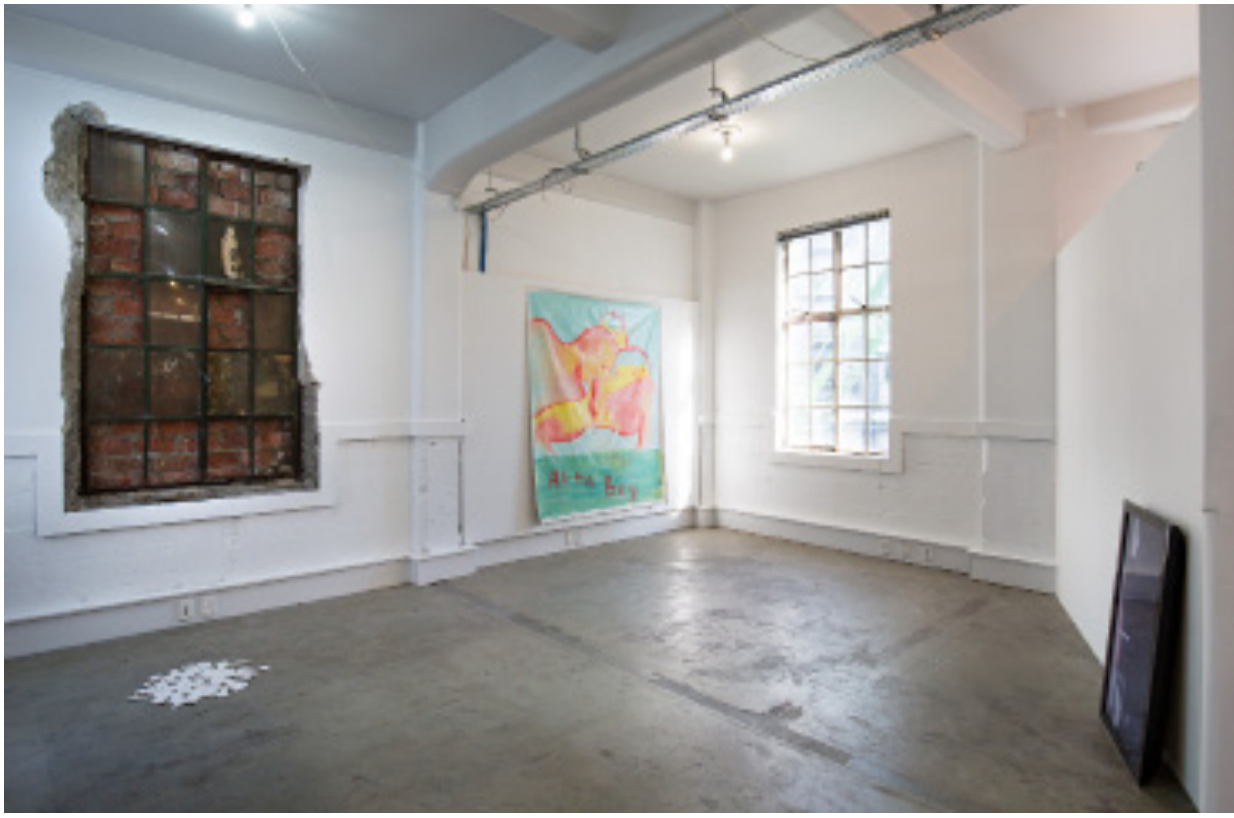
Emma Bugden explores the current place of artist-run spaces in the art world ecosystem – finding that today they may be as much digital and relational as grounded in the physical world.

Start an artist-run space and get famous. That's how it works, right? A group of friends rent a cheap building, show their own work and that of their art school network and catch the spotlight of the larger art world. Many of the current generation of New Zealand artists on the international scene entered the art world as members of an artist collective and many more cut their teeth exhibiting at one.

The first alternative art spaces in New Zealand, such as 100m^2 in Auckland and the Women's Gallery in Wellington, emerged in the early 1980s. At the time, dealer galleries largely exhibited commercially proven work and public galleries were lumbering in their responsiveness. By contrast, the new artist-run spaces were non-commercial, artist-centred and played an important, if largely forgotten, role in developing an emergent scene. Teststrip (Auckland, 1992–97) is generally considered the first true New Zealand artist-run space: it was made up of a group of friends and artists who role-played themselves, strutting their stuff and defining a generation of experimental practice.

Today, however, many dealers are advocates for ephemeral and difficult work that once would have been possible only at non-commercial spaces. A raft of mid-scale galleries such as Artspace and ST PAUL St Gallery in Auckland, Wellington's Adam Art Gallery and The Physics Room in Christchurch have adopted similarly responsive programming, exhibiting new artists in tandem with or immediately after artist-run exposure. So where do artist-run spaces fit in the ecology now?

The shadow of Teststrip still looms surprisingly large, even though today's practitioners were children during its reign. Jordana Bragg of Wellington's MEANWHILE describes



Opposite: Crowds at the opening of Motoko Kikkawa's exhibition *Shortsighted Girl's Very Thick Wall*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, 2017

Above: Installation view of *No One is Sovereign in Love*, curated by Simon Gennard, MEANWHILE, Willis Street, Wellington, 2017. The painting is by Robbie Handcock. Photo courtesy of Russell Kleyn

Right: The opening of *Pool Party: The Inaugural Studio Group Show*, MEANWHILE, Victoria Street, Wellington, 2016

it as an important forerunner, although she notes that her understanding of its impact comes largely from photos: "Of course they might not reflect how it really was."

MEANWHILE combines confidence with speculative thinking, and evokes some of the theatricality of Teststrip. It began early in 2016 around the same time as another new space, play_station; together, they were the first new artist-run spaces in Wellington for many years. Started by recent graduates from Massey University's art school, MEANWHILE hit the ground running, presenting an assured exhibition programme and generating significant attention. Bragg says, "We provide the first step, the interesting step and the step that's free of constraints."

The space is currently operated by artists and founders Bragg and Jesse Bowling, along with designer Sean Burn, who all juggle their work for the space with part-time jobs. The gallery also runs a studio programme, supporting it financially and generating a community that activates the space through the week.

Co-founder Bragg knew she would one day start a space, "I just thought it would take a lot longer to happen." She was spurred on by a panel on artist-run spaces held by Enjoy Gallery, where the panel members questioned the lack of opportunities in Wellington and called for younger artists to pick up the mantle. It evolved quite naturally, recalls Bowling. "It wasn't like we started writing manifestos about what MEANWHILE is. We've just been learning and doing and trying to take a new approach, a less institutional approach. We are an institution, but we're making our own framework. What do we want from MEANWHILE? What do we want MEANWHILE to be?"

The final, epic show in their first location on Victoria Street was *Pool Party*, a sprawling, exuberant exhibition that brought together their studio artists. Next up will be a series titled *Slumber Party*, featuring all current and former studio artists. The intention is to update the 'party' every year, as new artists move through the MEANWHILE structure. Burn describes it as the ultimate MEANWHILE project because

Interior view of captcha, Newton Road, Auckland, showing work by Ronan Lee and Jasper Owen

it's about "supporting and developing the practices of all these artists and keeping in touch when they're gone. It's an ongoing collaborative community."

In Auckland, spaces emerge regularly but disappear quickly too, the inevitable result of a fevered real estate market. Twenty-five years after Teststrip claimed Karangahape Road, artist-run spaces still get a regular look-in on the street, even as the wider environment has gentrified. Since early 2017 Mokopōpaki has been the new kid on K' Road. They signalled a different approach from the very beginning, from brown-painted walls to an emphasis on te reo. With edgy, intriguing shows including the elusive duo Yllwbro and a gallery takeover by Billy Apple, I assume Mokopōpaki is an artist-run space. But when I ask director Jacob Terre he demurs. Mokopōpaki, he says, "is a commercial proposition. We see ourselves as the sleek, new dealer gallery on the sunny side of Karangahape Road. Mokopōpaki is an inclusive place with Māori ideas and values at its centre. We are a critical collective or whānau who want to make 'art for people' accessible." Again, the line between public and private is blurring.

More firmly in the artist-run camp is another new Auckland contender, captcha. Run by Jerome Ngan-Kee, Loulou Callister-Baker, Maxi Quy and Grant Priest, captcha operates out of the flat they live in. Fridays and Saturdays it's a gallery, the rest of the week it functions as their lounge. The Eden Terrace building has had various incarnations –starting in 1897 as a pigeon-carrier postal service from Great Barrier to Auckland –which makes its current hybridity appropriate.

Living and showing in the same space makes economic sense, thanks to a supportive landlord, but also provides a more personal relationship with the work they show. It allows, Ngan-Kee suggests, "slightly stranger and intimate analysis", especially in writing about the work. captcha conceptualise the space itself as an artwork, and in 2018 they plan to experiment further, moving away from a standard proposal format and instead borrowing, says Ngan-Kee, "from models more typically instigated by journals". As he notes, "small and precarious spaces have unique abilities to create that are untenable, unseeable and undesirable by larger-scale institutions".

Part of this shape-shifting is a move away from an emphasis on physical space, especially in Auckland. A cluster of new collectives generates events, exhibitions and publications, finding audiences without committing to a permanent home. Run by digital natives and moving easily between online and real space, these initiatives are performing many of the traditional roles of the artist-run space. "It's not really about being digital but we use the website as a resource and documentation for a wider public audience," says Hapori, an Auckland-based collective. "We decided not to rent a permanent space due to rent costs, however, this has meant new ways of exhibiting have come to the fore."

Two emerging artists, Ayesha Green and Sorawit Songsataya, operate Hapori as a collective voice to publish and exhibit in multiple forms – print journal, digital download and physical exhibitions held over a single weekend in sites as diverse as the Auckland Women's Centre, a downtown office and Corban Estate Art Centre. Using different existing venues, say Hapori, means "the exhibitions we help to produce become unique in terms of their settings and contexts. Each location helps to affirm the context of each show."

Hapori invites a guest curator for each themed edition, bringing a different tonal quality every time. From 'Waltzing Macabre' to 'Anti-Heroine', the different topics reflect each curator's own interests. "We want to support emerging artists and curators, to give them a platform similar to a research or a study opportunity. Each project requires adaptability and a different working relationship. Sometimes it's a lot of emailing, sometimes it's physical meetings. On

Above: installation view of hapori vol. 1, *Dead to the World*, curated by Bridget Riggir and including work by Dan Nash, Ella Scott-Fleming, Teghan Burt, Gregory Kan, An Dres and Miri Davidson

Left: Visitors at the opening of hapori vol. 4, *Waltzing Macabre*, organised by Tom Tuke and Ronan Lee, and including work by Rachel Duval, Anna Sisson and Joanna Neumegen

some occasions we organise group activities together with participating contributors."

Hapori's slippage between physical and digital, between exhibition and publication, is typical of the new artist-run collectives. Operating at a time of heightened sensitivity towards difference and diversity, artist-runs are engaged in conversations on inclusion in a markedly new way. Reflecting on MEANWHILE's programme, Sean Burn says, "We don't just want to show white male artists all the time" – although, on second thoughts: "We haven't actually shown many!" The programme at MEANWHILE, Burn says, reflects "a lot of gender-diverse artists, a lot of female artists and we try to make it as culturally diverse as possible".

While Auckland is clearly a focus of activity, spaces operate across the country. Skinroom opened in the Hamilton suburb of Frankton in 2015, run by two artists, Eliza Webster and Geoffrey Clarke. Housed in a space that was once a tattoo parlour, Skinroom's programme largely reflects the local art community, with a focus on Wintec students and graduates. The regional emphasis is deliberate; as the only artist-run space in Hamilton they are acutely aware, as Webster says, that they "have a duty here to provide a space for people to exhibit their work and facilitate conversation".

Their location in a suburb of a provincial city also provides a different flavour, she suggests. "It's a very multicultural little place, with lots of op-shops and organics shops and we have a market outside our front door every Saturday morning." Real estate is on their side, with enough space for studios and two gallery spaces, one sporting a distinctive black-and-white-tiled floor. "Managing an artist-run space in Auckland would be much more difficult," says Webster. "The opportunity for us to find a building like the one that we have here would be near impossible."

Asked to pinpoint an exhibition that signalled a turning point for the space, Webster picks *A Collection of Works* from 2016, by local artists Joseph Scott and Robert Forrester. An installation that combined natural and industrial materials in sculptural assemblages, it hung, balanced and strapped itself to the space. "This was the first exhibition," explains Webster, "where the artists came in and took full control of the space, left no wall untouched, and really transformed the building."

Skinroom usually charges an artist fee for showing, to contribute towards costs, and sell work on commission as well. The rest of the expenses are shared equally by Webster

Artists in the Skinroom space, Frankton, Hamilton, and (left) Joseph Scott, *Equal Rats*, 2017, fabric, acrylic, found op-shop painting, from his exhibition, *You Are Passing Another Fox,* Skinroom, March 2017

and Clarke. "Skinroom was never designed to be a money-maker, it was started to serve a purpose in our community, that is to allow people to show their work in a public space."

Further afield and more established, Dunedin's Blue Oyster Art Project Space started in 1999, its grandiose name homage to a gay biker bar from *Police Academy.* Formalised from the very beginning, with a board of trustees and a paid administrator, the Blue Oyster has consciously aimed for longevity, and these days hovers somewhere between an artist-run and the establishment. Director Grace Ryder says, "Blue Oyster originated from a gap, like most if not all artist-led initiatives. It was and remains today (although not sustained throughout 18 years), the only one of its kind in tepoti, heightening the need for it."

Ryder is the Blue Oyster's 14th director. She came to the gallery earlier this year from Christchurch, where she had co-founded the artist-run space North Projects, a small but critical voice that argued for art practices not explicitly tied to the city's post-earthquake regeneration. Reflecting on the shift, she says, "the difference is one of them I am paid to run, and the other I paid for it to run. At both North Projects and Blue Oyster, my ethics of practice, the reason behind doing what I do, remain the same."

Blue Oyster's current home on Dowling Street is a classic white-cube space (especially compared to its last iteration in a basement), its street frontage ensuring a profile alongside neighbours Milford Galleries and Brett McDowell Gallery. The exhibition programme focuses on emerging artists, most based outside of Dunedin, with gallery activities supported by residencies and workshops.

It's a model that's survived regular changes in personnel, location and funding. Since 2010 each director is appointed on a three-year contract, ensuring a regular injection of new energy. Ryder points to this succession as crucial to sustaining relevance. She believes the gallery has a responsibility both to Dunedin and nationally; in recent years it has positioned itself as "a national space with its roots planted firmly here". While Blue Oyster sees itself within a wider dialogue, "We have a responsibility to those who live and practice here, to keep them connected."

Blue Oyster, strictly speaking, has expanded beyond its artist-run roots, but perhaps it's also that our idea of an artist-run has changed. Artist-run spaces began as a response to gaps within the gallery system. But the art world is constantly remaking itself and artist-run spaces have gone from opposition to coexistence alongside public and private galleries. Perhaps it's time to stop thinking of them as alternatives and instead as a vital, if fluid part of the ecology. Hybrid forms may be the only way for artist-run culture to survive.

And, as Blue Oyster have proven, being at the bottom of the country doesn't dictate audiences. Out there is as important as right here. As such, it's representative of the current artist-run spaces which emphasise the importance of online audiences and exist within a national or international infrastructure. But does the emphasis on the digital mean the need for an actual space is disappearing? Sean Burn says no. "Everything digital is always grounded in the physical. We have real people meeting in a real environment and the digital is a reflection or counterpart to that. We are bodies, we are physical."