

# AN IRREGULAR CONFEDERACY

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Better stop dreaming of the quiet life  
'Cos it's the one we'll never know  
And quit running for that runaway bus  
'Cos those rosy days are few  
And...stop apologising for the things you've never done  
'Cos time is short and life is cruel  
But it's up to us to change...  
— The Jam<sup>1</sup>



Artist-run spaces in Australia are sites of self-determination for artists within the art system. In these spaces, artists are able to resist the established system of commodification and offer alternatives to the structures of existing institutions. They achieve these aims through a variety of collectivist strategies and collaborative actions, which allow artists to take control of the means of production, and agitate for change and recognition. It is this capacity for artists' actions to affect sector-wide change that makes their initiatives, galleries and collaborations legitimate sites of resistance.

Canadian cultural critic, artist and curator, Clive Robertson writes about the way artists change the circumstances in which they make and exhibit their work. Robertson encourages artists to become “participatory citizens” and engage with the formation of policy. For Robertson, the term “policy” concerns the ‘managerial and discursive processes that make up the conditions of the production and reception of art’.<sup>2</sup> This participatory strategy embodies a critique of existing conditions by those most sensitive to its inadequacies—artists themselves. What Robertson is championing here is the formation of self-made bureaucracies, by and for artists, and points to Canada, with its vibrant Artist Run Centres (ARCs) as exemplifying this tradition of contestation.

Emerging in the early 1970s, when Australian artists were forming the first alternative galleries, Canadian ARCs were responding to the dominating presence of American media culture<sup>3</sup> and advocating for artist’s right to choose how they make and present their work. Well known ARCs include Western Front in Vancouver (est. 1973), White Water Gallery in North Bay (est. 1974), Eyelevel Gallery in Nova Scotia (est. 1974), Or Gallery (est. 1983) and Artspeak (1986). The oldest ARC, A Space Gallery in Toronto was established in 1971 and has lead developments in policies on such progressive issues as payment of standard artist fees (1982), anti-censorship (1984), anti-racism (1985) and access (1993).<sup>4</sup> Canadian ARCs have continued to develop over the subsequent half-century, with the help of layers of representative organisations, associations and alliances, to the point where many have firmly secured their position within Canadian cultural life. As such, it is not a stretch to say that the socio-political impact and longevity of such artist-run centres is intrinsically linked to their willingness to engage head-on in collective lobbying for artist-centered policy.

By contrast, Australian Artist-Run initiatives (ARIs) today retain a mostly volunteer, committee-run, short-term model that relies on artists paying fees to sustain commercial rents. Existing within an ecology comprised of a modest number of institutional galleries and small commercial market, ARIs are simultaneously fragile and absolutely vital. This unstable situation exists in spite of models for independent spaces taking shape as early as the 1960s, including galleries such as: Gallery A,<sup>5</sup> established in Melbourne in 1959 and then in Sydney in 1964; Central Street Space founded in 1964 by artists Tony McGillick, John White and Harald Noritis; and Inhibodress, established in 1971 in Sydney by artists Mike Parr, Peter Kennedy and Tim Johnson. The pioneering work of these early spaces offered a stripped back DIY alternative to institutional galleries, giving visibility to unrepresented practices in the Australian art scene, namely formal abstraction and emerging conceptual, performance and video art.

Growth and longevity in ARIs need not be synonymous with negative attributes of stagnation, inaccessibility and stifling bureaucracy. Artist, writer and West Space founder, Brett Jones explains that continued leadership by artists allows small-scale organisations to remain agile. This nimbleness exists because ‘...artists are integrated with their spaces through their practice—the running of the space often becomes blurred with “practice.”<sup>6</sup> The work that artists do in ARIs, including curating, writing, directing, marketing and critiquing their own and others’ artwork, results in artist-centric models of operation where practitioners can participate in the creation of their own histories.

In fact, the self-determining impulses of artist-run spaces and their committees, says Jones, entitles them to set the conditions for and participate in the writing of their histories.<sup>7</sup> Sadly, due to the short life-cycle of Australian ARIs, much of what is written about their impact is in memoriam. While such exhibitions and publishing projects as *Q Space + Q Space Annex 1980 + 1981* (1986)<sup>8</sup>, *Inhibodress 1970-1972* (1989)<sup>9</sup> and *Pitch Your Own Tent: Art Projects / Store 5 / 1st Floor* (2005)<sup>10</sup> provide an important historicising function, it also permeates the sector with a sense that artists’ initiatives are always fleeting. Whether or not this is true, reinforcing such a notion perpetuates a culture of unsustainable volunteerism and perpetual subservience.

This need not be the epitaph of Australia’s Artist-Run organisations. We can resist the endless cycle of boom, burnout and bust by joining together to share knowledge, resources, and advocate for local, state and federal policy change. A confederacy of such diverse groups, comprised of individual artists, represents a powerful irregular<sup>11</sup> force that could campaign for greater levels of funding for the arts in general. The health of the small-scale, artist-run sector and the artists who sustain it is of vital importance to the visual arts in Australia, yet artists are on average some of the country’s lowest paid workers.<sup>12</sup> Self-determination does not just mean we are permitted to ‘pitch our own tents’ outside of the palaces of rich and powerful,<sup>13</sup> but that we get a fair share of the spoils we helped to create.

1 The Jam, *Town Called Malice*. By Paul Weller. The Gift. Polydor (UK), 1982.

2 Conlin, Peter. “The Pragmatics and the Promise of Working with and Not for: Policy and Canadian Artist-run Culture”, in *Topia*, No. 20, 2008.

3 Faguet, Michèle. “A Brief Account of Two Artist-Run Spaces,” in *Fillip*, vol.1, No.3 (2006).

4 A Space Gallery, “History+Mandate”, <http://www.aspacegallery.org> (access 10 March 2016).

5 The development of Gallery A was influenced by sculptor Clement Meadmore, who encouraged the founder, Max Hutchinson, to exhibit Australian contemporary abstract art and sculpture.

6 Bridie, Sandra. *Artists /artist-run spaces: interviews with artists from six Melbourne artists’s spaces*. West Space Inc, Melbourne, 2003.

7 Jones, Brett. “History in the making”, *un Magazine*, No.5, 2005. <http://asinlife.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/History-in-the-making.pdf> (accessed 5 March 2016).

8 Cripps, Peter. *Q Space and Q Space Annex 1980 + 1981*, held at Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1986.

9 Cramer, Sue. *Inhibodress 1970-1972* held at Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1989.

10 Delany, Max. *Pitch Your Own Tent*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2005.

11 The term “irregular” relates to a military force that is any non-standard and distinct from the regular army.

12 According to the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA), incomes in general have risen in line with the country’s growing economic prosperity, however, the average annual income of an Australian artist is \$10,000, which is a fraction of the median average earnings of the country’s workforce. An article by Susan Jones in the Guardian (UK) compares artist incomes across the world (<http://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/2015/jan/12/artists-low-income-international-issues>).

13 Artist Gustave Courbet (1819 - 1877) erected his own exhibition, *Le Réalisme*, in a tent and charged admission, when he was refused by the Universal Exhibition of 1855, held at Palais de l’Industrie (Palace of Industry) in Paris. The title of the exhibition and publication, *Pitch Your Own Tent: Art Projects / Store 5 / 1st Floor* (2005), presented by Monash University Art Museum, reference this particular work and sentiments behind it.

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