

Scanlines

Media Art in Australia Since the 1960s

detail from *Feedback*, by Stephen Jones, 1987.

Firstdraft

Artist Run Initiative

First Draft was incorporated in 1985 as a non-profit, artist managed organisation and established in 1986 with seed funding from the Australia Council. Every two years a new group of directors is selected to administer First Draft. It is expected that the directors are themselves practising artists. The turnover of directors provides the opportunity for a reformation of the way the gallery functions and provides the possibility for new approaches to the style of artwork it shows. This gallery, in its third relocation since its inception, is now located in premises in Surry Hills, Sydney. The longevity of First Draft is probably due to a range of factors. Certainly, funding from Arts NSW and the Australia Council is one of the most important. This funding has been invaluable in that it has allowed for the reduction of some of the rent expected from the artists who exhibit there. This is particularly significant in terms of equity for access to exhibition, given the cost of rent in inner Sydney compared to the rest of Australia.

Early History

The early eighties was a time that saw an increase in the activities of a great number of Sydney artists, resulting in the formation of the Artworkers Union (1979), a push for a publicly funded contemporary art gallery (Artspace opened in 1982) and the publication of *Art and Text*. These ventures did much to raise the level of discussion and critical debate within the loosely associated array of artists and artist co-operatives working in Sydney at the time. As well, a number of artist-run spaces were applying for seeding grants from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, prompting in 1984 a major review by the VAB into the needs of ARIs and the subsequent development of funding guidelines.

By 1985, however, the momentum built up from these activities had begun to diminish. The demise of a number of ARIs, including Art Unit and the Art/Empire/Industry, escalating rental costs and the development of the inner city, all led to a re-evaluation of artist co-operatives and alternative spaces. It was a period that saw many artists complaining about the lack of venues around Sydney in which to exhibit. Art students and recent graduates were finding it difficult to bridge the gap between art college and professional practice. Artists engaging in non-commercial or experimental works were provided with few venues in which to exhibit, and women, in particular, were finding it difficult to break into the male dominated world of Sydney's commercial galleries. This problem was compounded by the instability of the commercial galleries, with some floundering at this time due to a fall in market demand or poor management. In some cases, this poor management included the non-payment of artists, with some galleries using profits from the sale of artworks to stave off financial deterioration.

It was in this climate of growing dissatisfaction with the status quo that First Draft emerged. Founded in 1986, and housed within the premises of an existing studio space, First Draft was initially intended to be only a two year project. The studios, housed on the second floor of a warehouse on Abercrombie Street, Chippendale, had been established by Tess Horwitz and Roger Crawford in 1983, and also housed the office of Art Bulletin, a monthly calendar of Sydney exhibitions and openings initiated by Tess Horwitz and Narelle Jubelin in 1984. Tess Horwitz, Paul Saint and Narelle Jubelin had recently completed post-graduate studies at the City Art Institute, Sydney, when they and Roger Crawford, a graduate from the National Art School, began discussing the idea of setting up a gallery in the Abercrombie Street studios. In July 1985, an application was submitted to the Visual Arts Board requesting funding to assist in the initial renovation and establishment costs of the gallery, with a view to the gallery opening in March 1986.

The proposal gave a fairly detailed description of the space itself, as well as a statement regarding the objectives of the co-ordinators and the organisational model on which the gallery would be administered. These objectives

spanned a number of different areas, with the primary intention being to provide a professional environment in which artists could exhibit contemporary art outside of the system of mainstream commercial galleries. This principle of running a soundly administered gallery resulted in the introduction of artists contracts, which provided a statement of the responsibilities of the gallery and of the artist in relation to rental obligations, commission, installation and removal of work, supervision of the venue and so on. The gallery was covered by public liability insurance, and artists were provided with financial statements. As well as this, a set of guidelines was instituted in relation to the sale of work, with requirement of a ten percent deposit and a full payment upon the conclusion of the show. It was a policy designed to support the concept of the artist as a professional in the artist/gallery relationship.

First Draft encouraged artists to submit proposals involving non-traditional art forms such as performance, installation, and technology-based artworks, as well as curated exhibitions and projects. The co-ordinators sought to foster links with other artist-run initiatives, while at the same time distinguishing the gallery from many such venues in its facility to accommodate large scale works and exchange shows.

The ideal of accessibility was carried over into the gallery's financial administration, with the objective being to minimise the often considerable costs artists incur in exhibiting their work. In those early years, inadequate funding meant that First Draft was, to a large extent, financed by its co-ordinators, who subsidised artists' rents, mail out and opening night costs. Whereas in later years many of these costs would be covered by government funding, First Draft's initial grant of \$2, 444.00 from the Visual Arts Board was used to renovate the existing studio into a working exhibiting space, as well as paying for establishment costs such as incorporation, council approval and so on.

Early Exhibitions

The program for the first four months included two group shows, *Forbidden Fruit* and *Spirit of Place*, and solo shows by Robert Eadie, Su Baker, and Bonita Ely. *Forbidden Fruit*, an all women's show, inaugurated the First Draft exhibition program, and included the artists Linda Forester, Ann Harris, Donna Marcus, Carolyn Ostenhaus, Peta Sanderson, Margaret Morgan and Deborah Singleton. *Forbidden Fruit* coincided with the 1986 International Women's Day, and addressed current debates in feminist art practice. The exhibition included installations, drawing, photography and painting, and was accompanied by a catalogue written by Jo Holder and Catriona Moore. This catalogue, whose format borrowed graphics from the game Cluedo, attempted to circumvent the reductionist tendency to include all work produced by female artists into the homogeneous categories of 'women's art' or 'feminist art'. At the same time, the writers questioned the traditional relations between artist/writer/curator, and argued for a re-negotiation of these relations:

The familiar division of labour between writer (as disembodied theory/commentary), artist (embodied practice) and curator (disembodied custodian) has been increasingly queried through interest in artist curated, collaborative or reflexive exhibition projects. These have been marked by inter-disciplinary referencing of cultural and political analysis. In these contexts, the conventional function of the writer as cipher of an authorial expression and value becomes dubious.

In this type of work, a dialogue is introduced and a proposition is made, which offers the possibility for developing parameters for a space such as First Draft. An exhibition serves as a reference point from which a kind of orientation takes place, each exhibition becoming an event that re-establishes the trajectory of the gallery, as well as continually realigning the position of the gallery in respect to its general artistic milieu. Rather than taking up the position of an 'alternative space', a term which implies an almost seductive or binary opposition to a mainstream practice, First Draft, and many other ARIs, have taken more of a discursive approach, where a program of exhibitions becomes a site where a multiplicity of practices and theoretical debates can be played out. First Draft has been consistent in its policy to foster work with critical agendas.

In 1986, First Draft hosted sixteen exhibitions as well as a benefit for the Artworkers Union. A number of these were group shows or collaborative exhibitions, with a good proportion being accompanied by publications and catalogues. About half of the exhibitions at First Draft in 1986 and 1987 were reviewed by critics from Sydney's metropolitan daily newspapers, including John McDonald, Terence Malloon, Bruce Adams and Bronwyn

Watson. Many of these exhibitions dealt critically with the discourses current within their own field of practice, while others broadened the parameters of their art practice by collaborating with or adopting the forms employed by artists working in different media. In 1987, the exhibition program tended more towards solo shows, including *Twelve*, a series of twelve one person shows with artists exhibiting for a period of twenty-four hours on consecutive days.

Change of Directors

Towards the middle of 1987, the co-ordinators of First Draft circulated a document calling for expressions of interest from artists wishing to take over the co-ordination of the gallery during 1988 and 1989, with artists who had exhibited in the gallery also being invited to submit a proposal. The document outlined the policies of the co-ordinators, and gave a measure of the running costs and the time that would be required by the new co-ordinators to administer and staff the gallery. The second group of co-ordinators were Adrienne Boag, Mikala Dwyer, Astrid Kriening and Joanne McCambridge. The new group saw a need for women to increase their level of representation in the management of artist-run initiatives. Their proposal emphasised their interest in feminist art practice, and their aim was to redress the disparity in the gender balance evident in galleries and institutions in Sydney at the time. Graduates from Sydney College of the Arts, and informed by a background in performance, installation and sculptural work, the group wanted to depart from the painting and two dimensional artwork that was coming back into vogue during the mid-to-late eighties. There was a perception that the first group of directors had exhibited established artists and had built up a profile through a program that included some very slick, professional looking shows.

The second group reacted against this by encouraging proposals from artists who couldn't necessarily exhibit their work elsewhere, and began including those artists engaging in more conceptually-based work. Emphasis was placed on the non-preciousness of the gallery, and its ability to facilitate alterations to the space. Their program included student shows and a number of event nights featuring performance and sound based works, with one such event, *Sirens*, running over a period of two weeks and featuring over sixty artists. The second group of co-ordinators, along with subsequent groups, benefited from a policy change by the Visual Arts/Crafts Board in 1987 that saw funds allocated towards the establishment, administration and operating costs of artist-run initiatives. With grants of \$5,000.00 in both 1988 and 1989, the second group were, to a large extent, able to manage First Draft without incurring the personal financial burden experienced by the founding co-ordinators.

However, relations with the landlord were deteriorating. Strict fire rating laws put many artist-run initiatives, traditionally occupiers of warehouses and industrial buildings, in dubious legal standing. This was the case with 2/27 Abercrombie Street, where access to the second floor did not conform to standards required for public access. This created tensions with the landlord, who, because of the low rent and dubious legal status of the gallery, would frequently threaten the group of eviction or dramatic increases in rent. By the end of 1989, after the third group of co-ordinators had been selected, this threat had become a reality. The massive increase in rent meant that the prospect of remaining in the building was untenable. The new co-ordinators, Janet Shanks, Helga Groves, Vincente Butron, Kate Mackay and Maria Cruz found themselves bereft of a space.

First Draft (West)

So it was in a negative climate that the third group began the task of looking for a space in which to rehouse the beleaguered gallery. The group looked at a number of locations around the inner west, including premises in Newtown and Leichhardt, and were eventually shown the property at 39 Parramatta Road Annandale. It was a shopfront building with a large showroom on street level as well as a number of other smaller rooms on a first floor. Despite its appearance as a commercial property, it had an industrial zoning, making it difficult to lease. As a result, the building had been vacant for a number of years, and had fallen into a state of disrepair, plagued by rising damp, rotting floorboards and an infestation of rats. Despite these blemishes, the group saw the potential for the building, and, with the help of Arts Law, drew up a list of demands and a lease agreement to present to the new landlord. Enthusiastic for the gallery to go ahead, Mr Jacob, the landlord, met all of the demands. The group received \$5,000.00 in emergency funding from the VA/CB to pay for the move, as well as \$5,000.00 towards

administration and operating costs. Renovations to the space were carried out over December and early January 1990. Linoleum was taken up from the floor, and the walls were sanded back and repainted.

In its first incarnation, First Draft (West), as it came to be known, housed the gallery in the large front room on the ground floor with the office situated in the annexe. Studios were situated on the upper levels, with one of them occasionally being used as accommodation for artists who had travelled from interstate. The rent for the building was \$350.00 per week, and this cost was covered by the artists who rented the studios and who exhibited in the gallery.

In Full Sunlight was the first exhibition to open at 39 Parramatta Road. Curated by Scott Redford and Luke Roberts, it included over sixty artists, many of whom were established artists represented by commercial galleries (Susan Norrie, Lindy Lee, John Young among others). Graduates from the painting department at Sydney College of the Arts, the new co-ordinators introduced different aesthetic and curatorial considerations to those of the previous group, despite having trained at the same institution. A preference for painting and two dimensional work, in particular conceptual work or work that articulated theoretical concerns, soon became evident as the third group began to develop the gallery's program. In this period, the new co-ordinators began to distance First Draft from other ARIs, a policy that marked a significant difference from previous groups, who had always maintained some sort of relationship with other artist-run spaces, including ARI – a loose organisation that represented artist-run initiatives in NSW. There was a move away from the idea of being an alternative space or an artists' co-operative, in favour of a notion of First Draft being an artist-managed gallery. Efforts put into the creation of a clean, orderly type of space, along with an increased emphasis on the cultivation of formalised artist/gallery relations, all developed out of the objective of presenting as close a face as possible to that of any commercial gallery.

The exhibition program was divided into two six month blocks, instituting a requirement for proposal deadlines, a policy that contrasted with the previous policy of keeping the gallery open to proposals throughout the year. The third group preserved the custom of interviewing all of the artists who submitted proposals, which gave artists, particularly those who were not adept at composing written proposals, or who had inadequate visual documentation, an opportunity to explain and present their work. By the third month of the gallery's operations, a decision was made to open up a second exhibiting space on the upper level. The room was intended to be a kind of project space, where the co-ordinators could exhibit their own work as well as work by artists who they considered could contribute a certain critical element to the gallery. John Nixon exhibited there on one occasion, with Monochrome Chapel, Project for a One Year Exhibition (August 1990), a show put on in conjunction with an exhibition by the German artist, Stefan Jehler, in the downstairs space.

Selecting artists out of each set of proposals was a process requiring a balance between the co-ordinators' subjective views and aesthetics, and the need to exhibit a range of work in line with the gallery's obligation to the funding body.

Funding Issues

Government funding played a significant role. As mentioned earlier, administration grants from the VA/CB required the gallery to meet a number of objectives. These included that the gallery provide evidence of adequate planning and sound administration, as well as demonstrable evidence of its relevance to the artistic community. On the other hand, the provision of funding meant, to a small degree, that First Draft could try to maintain a consistency in the quality of its exhibitions, thereby adding to the credibility of the gallery and making a significant contribution to a venue for contemporary art.

The new group, who took over in January 1992, found themselves in the position of 'acquiring' the gallery in a good financial position, with a secure lease and reasonable rent. The five co-ordinator's, Linda Goodman, Simone Patterson, Rod Jacka, Penny Thwaite and Richard Dabek, brought with them a range of artistic practices and influences – more individualised than the previous group. Backgrounds in a variety of media, including performance, installation, painting and photography, promoted a shift to a greater diversity in the exhibition

program, which also began to incorporate a small amount of craft-based work, such as jewellery, glass and ceramics. At the same time, the gallery was expanded to include two exhibiting spaces, one of which had been at various times a studio or storage space, the other being the small installation room known as +27.01.m3, that had been run by Mikala Dwyer and Justine Trendall between November 1990 and December 1991. This decision prompted partly by financial considerations and partly through demands for more space, meant that the gallery now had a total of four exhibiting spaces, with one studio and an office that was situated in the former kitchen on the first floor. A series of artists' talks were introduced, with exhibiting artists presenting informal lectures about their work and practice. Held usually on weekends, the talks were attended by the friends and supporters of the artists, but were eventually dropped due to a lack of wider interest. Fundraising events were usually more successful, with the inaugural First Draft ART RAFFLE attracting strong support, and the introduction of a lighting fund also bringing in a modest income.

Moving Again

In 1994, First Draft once again adopted a new identity. In a major change of location in Chalmers Street, Surry Hills. The decision was prompted by a number of considerations. These included a re-assessment of the suitability of the layout and architecture of the Annandale premises and of the deployment of the gallery over four separate spaces. Coupled with this was a concern with the gallery's location, and a perception that First Draft could benefit from once again being within the sphere of other inner city galleries. The new co-ordinators, all graduates of Sydney College of the Arts, included Leanne Barnett, Helen Hyatt-Johnston, Jane Polkinghorne, Virginia Ross, and Alex Gawronski (who left the group in mid 1994 and was replaced by Sharon Raggett). At the end of 1993, the group began to investigate the possibility of moving First Draft to a new location. Over a period of several weeks a number of sites were inspected before Virginia Ross was alerted to the possible availability of the Chalmers Street building during an Artworkers Union meeting.

The building was, in fact, owned by Tess Horwitz, a former co-director of First Draft and an active participant in the Sydney visual arts community. Tess Horwitz's mother had owned the building for thirty years, and had always had a policy of maintaining it at a low rent. When she died, the building was bequeathed to her children, and hence the building came to be made available to expressions of interest from the visual arts community. Negotiations between Tess Horwitz and First Draft were initiated, with the co-ordinators subsequently submitting a grant application to the VA/CB to fund the move, as well as investigating the legal avenues by which they could break the lease at the Parramatta Road premises.

Funding from the VA/CB came through in January 1994, including an administration grant, as well as emergency funding totalling nearly \$7,000.00 for moving costs and the refurbishment of the Chalmers Street premises. The curatorial possibilities presented by the Surry Hills premises differed greatly from those of the domestic environment of the previous building. The exhibiting spaces were reduced from four to two, affording the co-ordinators greater control over the make-up of the exhibition program. These spaces offered very specific architectural environments, one assuming formal qualities more akin to that of an institutional space, with the other retaining the characteristics of its industrial origins. Artists were encouraged to install work that addressed the specificity of the gallery's environment.

There was a move to re-affirm the gallery's relations with other ARIs and contemporary spaces. A marketing initiative by the directors of Artspace, in conjunction with First Draft, Boomali, Street Level, Performance Space and the Australian Centre for Photography, resulted in *Six of the Best*. Launched at Boomali gallery in 1994, the project aimed to increase awareness of these galleries through advertising and other promotional activities, including the Artbus. Transporting people to different galleries each Saturday, and hosted by a guest MC, the Artbus aimed to increase public accessibility to a range of Sydney's non-commercial visual arts venues.

The process of self assessment and re-evaluation will always remain integral to First Draft's ability to maintain its relevance to the visual arts community. New co-ordinators, forums, and publications have contributed to the gallery's ability to re-invent itself and partake in the debates occurring among artists, ARIs and various art institutions over the last fifteen years. Its evolution over this time has seen it pass through varying relations with

the network of artist-run spaces in Sydney and interstate, thus broadening its contact with artists from around Australia and encompassing the spectrum of artistic practices and debates. It is these activities and the support they have attracted, that have contributed to the survival of First Draft during periods of difficulty and of change. *** This is not a complete history of Firstdraft, but an abstract of time within the last 24 years.

from First Draft website

Website

First Draft

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