

Reflections on change in an artist run space

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Over the last couple of years I have been consumed with governance and management issues concerning West Space, and subsequently more generally with artist-run organizations. When an organization has been operating for a longer period of time, it must deal with how it is governed and operated with more detail and formality. West Space and Para/Site have shared several aspects of their respective histories over the years, and this seems to be no exception as both organizations implement structural changes and move into more sustainable models.

I have learned much from Para/Site over the years from the three exchange projects and several publications to which we have collaborated. In fact, the first exchange project we worked on together in 1997-98, Transaction, was the first international exchange project for both of our organizations. Since meeting Leung Chi Wo in 1997, I have compared notes about the challenges, pressures and issues that our respective organizations have negotiated. Even though the broader cultural and arts sector to which Para/Site operates is quite different to Australia's, the intrinsic concerns of any artist-run organisation are very similar no matter where they are in the world.

Knowing about some of the key issues tackled by Para/Site has provided me with a crucial reference point for the often-claustrophobic conditions of our own cultural context. In this sense I cannot overemphasise the importance of relationships between spaces in different parts of the world. The experience and knowledge contained in artist-run organizations is often taken for granted by the local arts community. Thus when you have the chance to work with organizations in other countries, there is a sense of mutual affirmation, providing bearings not appreciable in your own hothouse. Not to mention the knowledge sharing and professional networking that accompany such relationships.

Evolution is rarely natural. The development of an artist-run space is subject to a raft of pressures, tensions and influences that at once provide its lifeblood and *raison d'être*, while ultimately testing its members resolve and tenaciousness. It is these factors that provide the wellspring of theorising of what artist-run spaces are and could be. The fractures, polemics and antagonisms are essential grist to the ideological formation of artist run space.

Most recently, the appointment of a professional curator to run Para/Site, has raised some core issues regarding the often-implacable concept of 'artist-run'. Tobias Berger himself was quoted as saying Para/Site is now a 'curator run space'¹. This seems to be a substantial change in direction for Para/Site. But this situation is not unique to Para/Site. Longer term artist-run organizations will get to the point where they need to carefully consider their mission and

work out how they can best move forward. They may need to evolve or change their mission.

A recent article in *The Phillip Review* tackled this issue of organisational change; 'Some argued that the natural evolution of such a space would be its ultimate inclusion into the mainstream...' This comment could apply to many artist-run organizations in many different contexts. What interests me is that the comment is made by a 'professional curator' who was 'implicitly hired' by an artist-run space in Mexico City—*La Panadería*— 'to guarantee a smooth transition toward a more economically viable, self-sufficient space'.²

Berger has outlined some of the reasons for his appointment at *Para/Site* and the changes he has begun to institute, while responding to criticism.³ But one needs to remember that this decision was made by the board who are mostly artists. Therefore, artists are still governing the organization and leading its direction, though an artist is no longer in the key operational role. One also needs to remember, that individuals come and go, and while this appointee will bring about significant changes to the organization (under the auspices of the board), other individuals with different agendas and interests will follow.

This is an important realisation because it acknowledges the maturation of the organization in its ability to deal with change, both personnel and structural. One cannot often say this about artist led spaces, and indeed *La Panadería* did not make it through its transformation, as many others have floundered on the rocks of organisational change.

Small organizations are often dependent on the founding members and the culture they create within and around their space. People, as in audiences and supporters, do not like it when the organism they knew suddenly mutates into a different kind of animal. 'Change management' has become a HR (Human Relations) sub-industry in its own right. But from my perspective I do not see this change at *Para/Site* as essentially radical. I can also see how it has eventuated.

Several writers on Hong Kong art have commented on how the sector has big (conservative) institutions and small organizations (alternative/grass roots?), but nothing in between. Upon my first visit to Hong Kong, I distinctly remember discussing with Tsang Tak-ping the absence of medium sized contemporary art organizations, what in Australia are known as 'contemporary art spaces'. I rhetorically questioned whether *Para/Site* had ambitions to move in this direction, as it seemed a logical requirement for a fast developing contemporary art scene.

I am not sure whether this is the intent behind the new *Para/Site* structure, but it is useful that the appointee previously worked in a contemporary art space in New Zealand. However, it is presumptuous to think that *Para/Site* would even want to replicate a Western visual arts organization model. Knowing some of the founding members, and the way issues need to be dealt with

through application in artist led organisations, the appointment seems more likely to be a practical means of addressing operational and artistic program shortfalls.

This is one of the key attributes of an artist led organization: flexibility. The fact that the board could make this appointment without the approval of a government bureaucrat or minister is significant in comparison to larger organisations. This ability of artist led organisations to change and mutate must be embraced as one of their most positive attributes. In making recent changes to my own organisation, I know how hard this can be once members and supporters become accustomed to a well understood organisational culture. But I would argue this is all the more reason for change. Once an artist led organization becomes fixed in its artistic and operational direction then entropy often sets in. In this scenario it might as well be an institution, in the pejorative sense, for all intents and purposes.

Para/Site has encouraged a relatively diverse range of influences and interests to permeate the organisation. For a small organization operating in a small contemporary arts environment, they have a large reach and impact. I attribute this in part to the many levels of participation and involvement the organization has fostered for local and international artists, arts workers and audiences. This is another crucial quality of an artist run/led organization: access. Para/Site has demonstrated that it has many facets, many levels of access and involvement. This multi-dimensional approach to its activities and programs has provided a richness and depth to the organization, even as it has stretched its resources. Though there needs to be a balance so that people are not burned out and projects are not undermined by inadequate resourcing, keeping the activities of any artist led organization as inventive and unpredictable as possible is essential. The Para/Site founders and members have been very resourceful with their inventions over the last ten years, often wearing multiple hats of artist/curator/administrator.

Para/Site is reshaping itself as any symbiotic organization needs to do in response to changing cultural contexts, internal influences and the needs of artists. This is a positive process as any organization needs to reflect on its methods of operation and creative outcomes. Para/Site has developed rapidly over the last 10 years. The current changes seem to be about consolidation so that the organization may move forward with more surety and sustainability. I will be interested to see the impacts of these changes as they manifest themselves over the next couple of years.

Para/Site has demonstrated it has the resolve and maturity to negotiate its issues proactively. In fact, by the time this text is published the appointment of a professional curator to run the organisation will probably be completely passé. Who knows the next appointment could be another artist. The beauty of change is that it is full of surprise and anticipation. I can only hope that Para/Site continues with the surprises.

Notes:

1. Tobias Berger states that he was invited to help “transform an artist run space into a curator run one”. Transcripts of Presentations at a Study Day on Artist-led Culture, April 2006 Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. See www.midwest.org.uk
2. Michéle Faguet, A Brief Account of Two Artist-Run Spaces, The Fillip Review Vol1.No3, Vancouver, Canada.
3. Much of this debate took place on the Para/Site guest book. See <http://www.para-site.org.hk/> but also in public presentations by Berger at Para/Site.