

Pitch Your Own Tent - Art Projects / Store 5 / 1st Floor - Monash University Museum of Art 23 June - 27 August 2005.

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Sometimes it is the little asides in catalogues that can really pull an exhibition into focus. In the case of *Pitch Your Own Tent*, the aside could well be Andrew Hurle's photo-essay, '77 defunct artist-run galleries - Melbourne and Sydney 2002'. There are a couple of useful points that emerge from the inclusion of this simple set of photographs of sites that once housed artist-run galleries. The first is that there are so many of them, the second, that the images are so restricted, they tell us so little.

By tightening its focus to just three Melbourne based artist-run spaces - Art Projects, Store 5 and 1st Floor - *Pitch Your Own Tent* gives us a lot more detail. The excellent catalogue essays give us some idea of the 'scene' that developed around each project, while the exhibition itself presents us with a selection of work shown in each space, by artists ranging from Jenny Watson and Robert Jacks, Rose Nolan and Gary Wilson to Lyndal Walker and David Rosetzky. But with so much to cover, there it is still a real challenge to capture both the intensity (and intimacy) of each space, while also showing how it fits into the broader scheme of things.

While the curatorial approach seemed to want the work to speak for itself, I found myself looking for additional commentary that more clearly contextualised the work within the activities of each space. For although I had visited all three galleries on occasional visits to Melbourne over the years, I was actually surprised by how much of the work I'd seen before - occasionally in the space in question, but more frequently in quite other contexts (even other cities, like Brisbane).

Without overstating the case, these three spaces clearly have been important launching pads for many of the artists involved, although it needs to be said that what seems to have driven each is a more self contained idea of art practice, that perhaps would see such notions of artist-run space exhibitions as first career stages as overly simplistic.

In some ways Art Projects functioned as something of an inspiration for Store 5, just as 1st Floor was able to learn from that space. But of course the nature of contemporary practice changed substantially over the period covered by this show, not least in the way artist-run activities have in some ways been recast as a form of self-managed marketing, using 'the alternative space' as a strategy.

Looking carefully, it is possible to sense that of these three spaces it was Art Projects that was the most hybrid - and least easily positioned. Significantly, at the same time as he ran Art Projects, John Nixon was also director of the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane, as well as running other projects, like Q Space. These days it is difficult to imagine how

such practices might overlap, not to mention the challenge of leading and directing spaces and projects that now seem to be positioned so differently within the Australian art system - as well as keeping up a practice as an artist.

This is an important exhibition, and one that reveals just how much work still needs to be done to understand the important relationship between the spaces artists present their work in, and the nature of the work itself. But that also demands that the exhibition find a way of more clearly populating the spaces. What needs to be developed are the social - perhaps sociological - aspects of practice as it occurs. We need an exhibition that shows us more of the messy end of each space, the stuff that went on out the back, rather than just on the walls.