

Side-on in the City of Greed Russell Storer

Like the rest of society in this economic-rationalist era, the art scene in Sydney seems to be experiencing an increased polarisation. While there is a sense of buoyancy in the Australian art market unseen since the 1980s along with a proliferation of festivals and biennales, the "emerging" artist's situation seems to be in a state of crisis. While more people are enrolling in art schools than ever before, cuts in government funding and the subsequent restructuring of bodies such as the Australia Council has resulted in a dearth of opportunities at entry level for young artists and administrators.

Artist-run spaces have traditionally enabled those at the start of their careers to get crucial exhibiting and curating experience. The nature of these spaces is a volatile one almost by definition: often staffed by overworked and unpaid young artists, running on the most limited of funds, these spaces, despite the best of efforts, seldom last longer than a few years. Jacqueline Millner's recent article in *Artlink* magazine (vol. 17, no. 4) suggests that the short lifespan is a way of maintaining experimental integrity. This may be so, but very few spaces would close given the choice; and the longevity of spaces such as First Draft and CBD work in their favour, bestowing a prestige that is of benefit to the artists that show there.

One gallery that attracted an enormous amount of interest right from the start is **side-on inc.** Run by four young artists from Sydney College of the Arts (Melanie O'Callaghan, Tim Silver, Carla Cescon and Grant Ayre), the space in one year had exhibited a wide range of artists, was profiled in a number of publications, reviewed in *Art and Text*, and had collaborated with the Australian Centre for Photography.

In a small shopfront on Parramatta Road, Sydney's main east-west traffic artery, **side-on inc.** had been operating for a couple of years as a space showing mostly SCA student painters. Directed by Dominic Garcia, the gallery was an offshoot of **side-on inc. film production**, which had its premises upstairs. Under its new directorship, the agenda was to expand and diversify the programme, as well as to bring it to a wider audience. A large part of this strategy was the intention to show both young and emerging artists and those with commercial careers. "Our whole platform was showing younger artists like ourselves alongside more established artists, so the work would be assessed at the same level," Silver explains. "Most artist-run galleries in Sydney were catering for particular generations of artists. We wanted to create a cross-generational dialogue."

From the first exhibition, *Evil Art*, held in February 1997, the professionalism of the team was in evidence. The show included Adam Cullen and Paul Saint, and the gallery aesthetic was slick and resolved. The directors organised the mail-outs and promotional material, rather than leaving it to the artists, enabling a consistency throughout the year's programme. This was a conscious decision, flowing on from strong curatorial input from the collective. "We liked to know what was going in there", says O'Callaghan. "We made decisions about what was to go in. Every show was very much the **side-on** taste." Silver agrees. "Ultimately we were all coming from the same head space; there were never any issues about what was being shown."

This curatorial approach is an intriguing development in the artist-run space scene. One of the main attractions of such spaces is the lack of pressure for commercial viability, enabling a freedom to make work that may never gain entry into more mainstream galleries. For **side-on inc.** this freedom is tempered with a far more rigorous approach, from both curators and artists. It's not good enough to have a photocopied flyer and a cask of moselle at the opening any more: the artist must have a neat proposal on hand and a good line in networking. A large part of this is due to the lack of venues, particularly in Sydney. "I think [art] becomes a more rarefied experience in Sydney," speculates Silver. "You are in a situation where you are unable to have a lot of shows a year, so therefore the work that is being produced has more emphasis on refinement."

There is a simple reason for this of course: money. There isn't enough of it and Sydney is a big city with the highest rent and lowest property vacancy rate in the country. As a consequence, the competition for space is extraordinarily high and the low-earning artist-run space is hardly an attractive option for landlords. "Towards the end of last year the building we were in went up for sale and got sold when our lease was up," explains Silver. "We were forced into a situation where we had to relocate. Unfortunately we have run into some difficulty in finding a new venue, due to out-of-control real estate in Sydney-but we're still anticipating a mid-year opening." The situation is typical: despite the support and goodwill engendered by an innovative programme, the lack of money and of an institutional infrastructure has resulted in the gallery being placed on hold. "We've looked at so many places," says O'Callaghan. "It's really disappointing and disheartening not to have a space, because you lose the momentum, which we were really building up."

Other spaces seem to be running into similar problems. First Draft, Sydney's longest running space, has just lost its funding after over ten years of operations. It is still open, but has had to charge higher rents for the artists

exhibiting there. This is something that **side-on inc.** are keen to avoid. "The whole problem for an artist-run space is keeping the cost minimal for the artist so that it's feasible," says Silver. "The purpose of a space is that it gives people opportunities. If you have too high a rent, then you eliminate a lot of people." "We could charge \$2,000 for a show, which has been done," says O'Callaghan, "but that's not what an artist-run space is about." Other spaces such as CBD and 151 Regent Street also face possible relocation, both being in prime inner-city sites. Pendulum, Selenium, Toast and Airspace have all had to close in the last couple of years. It's a dire situation.

One part of **side-on inc.** which is still operating is its website, a key element in the gallery's agenda to bring the work to broader audiences. Artists were encouraged to use the site as an extension of their exhibition (this, however, didn't always happen). Each exhibition was documented, with Ayre maintaining the site with slides of the shows and artist statements. The directors found it useful for enquiries and proposals, with interested parties being directed towards the website for information.

The Internet presence also tied in with the nature of some of the exhibitions which were often temporal or off-site and relied on the documentation as evidence, which became the work itself. Other work, such as Daniel Malone's exhibition *Gondwanaland*, took a different approach to documentation, the work being a litany of recordings, childlike in their banality. Marathon consisted of "all the ink of each pen and the empty pen, on A4 paper." *Handshake* was an A4 colour photocopy of "a strawberry milkshake and hand." Film, video and sound pieces were also shown during the year-in a Net interview, Silver explained that the gallery steered away from traditional 'on the wall' media because "there are already plenty of places where you can go and show that kind of work." This kind of work doesn't sell, so the gallery didn't see too many collectors (where are the Saatchis in this town?) but it did attract a lot of interest from curators and the art press. "It wasn't an artist-run space community, because people from the commercial world came as well," says Silver. "We'd all been about and involved in the art world, so we were talking to these people and generating interest." The final show for the year was a joint effort with the prestigious Australian Centre for Photography, with **side-on inc.** being the venue for part of the New Photo Artists exhibition.

Despite this, the gallery is still without a space; and while the directors are looking at two or three sites a week, there is still the fundamental problem to contend with. Sydney has always been a city of greed-the landscape is dotted with its symbols (East Circular Quay is merely the latest example). Philanthropy is not widespread, and the collectors are a conservative bunch, by and large. The money being paid to artist-run spaces by the government has been concentrated, so that one or two venues (such as Artspace) get more money, while spaces such as First Draft get their funding cut. The directors remain resolute that the gallery will reopen mid-year, with a hopeful note being struck with the first scheduled exhibition, entitled Good. It's because you have to be.

side-on inc. website:

<http://www.personal.usyd.edu.au/~gayre/sideon.html>

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THE PHYSICS ROOM

