

WHY ARTIST-RUN SPACE?

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*'Utopia is not a kind of place but a kind of time, those all too brief moments when one would not wish to be anywhere else.'*ⁱ

It seems like an odd thing for an artist or a group of artists to do, that is set-up and run a small organization. Most artists complain that they do not have enough time for their own practice due to other competing commitments such as paid work. So why do they want to put more time into something that takes them away from the studio and does not provide an income source, and furthermore can be costing them money? Why do they persist in starting these co-operatives, informal groups and small organizations loosely gathered under the banner of artist-run initiative? The work of an artist run space can be very demanding and stressful as the ambitions of the organization increase. There are the legal responsibilities of dealing with property leases and receiving government funds, not to mention Business Activity Statements, insurance, promotion, minding the gallery, updating the website and endless administration. So why do we do it?

The most obvious reply is concerned with creating opportunity in the face of limited opportunities as a form of self-determination. In simple terms, there are many artists and they need places to present their ideas and work; there are simply not enough commercial galleries and contemporary art spaces to accommodate everyone. But this is the obvious and at times somewhat misleading answer, as I believe there are other factors at work here that are more connected to the creative psyche of the artist and social processes. Setting up an artist run space is not just a matter of supply and demand.

Emergence

Most artist-run spaces are established by artists soon after leaving art school. In this sense, artist-run spaces may also be a replacement for the peer support mechanisms found within educational institutions. The education environment is also premised on notions of feedback, mentoring and peer critique. Thus an understanding of peer support and the importance of networks is conferred at art school. However, art schools have difficulty accommodating collaborative practices, with individual work still being the preferred mode of practice. This is at odds with the co-operative and collaborative practices common in the art world, as well as being the basis for the operation of most artist run spaces.

Upon leaving art school—which nowadays could easily involve 5 years or more of study—artists understandably seek identifiable structures that will transfer some of the support networks into a professional context. These networks formally or informally organised through artist-run initiatives provide a form of professional legitimisation in the absence of few signs marking out just what the career of an artist is meant to be. Involvement in an artist-run space can be very useful in representing the interests of its members. It can be seen as supporting and enhancing their professional development.

These issues of post-art school support are also why artist-run spaces are often recognised by the broader industry as spaces for ‘emerging artists’. Funding bodies, especially the Australia Council, view artist run spaces (artist-run initiatives) as self-help organizations that are very effective in filling the void after art school. Because funding bodies effectively represent and implement government arts policy—which effects other institutions such as art schools—the correlation between artist-run spaces and emerging artists has become broadly accepted. This schema fits within a business model of organization scale and funding level. It means that because artist-run spaces are indexed to supporting emerging artists, their funding levels are proportionate to this career level. In the same way that there are different levels for New Work grants. Artist-run spaces have their place.

There is an implicit understanding that artists will only be able to maintain their involvement in an ARI before they must return to their individual practice. It is of no coincidence that in terms of art-life balance the best time to do this is in ones younger years. This is compounded by the fact that artist run spaces rarely pay staff wages; they are generally volunteer organizations. Thus there is no economic future for an artist being involved with an ARI, another reason for a high turnover of members.

However, artist run spaces are moving in different directions beyond this typically industry endorsed model. Some such as West Space are referring to models overseas that work more closely with artists throughout their careers to generate new ideas and experimental projects. This partnership model allows for more sustained and progressive engagement within a mutually supportive context. The emerging artists initiative model will always have an important role, but the industry must embrace the fact that artist-run organisations can be many other things as well. Constraining them into prescribed models is not healthy for Australian contemporary art.

Space as Ideology

In the 1960's and 1970's the term ‘alternative space’ was used to describe non-commercial spaces that showed the newest and most experimental developments in contemporary art, frequently based around conceptual, hybrid, temporal, performance practices. Alternative meant an alternative to museums and commercial galleries. Alternative spaces included spaces that received ongoing government funding i.e. ACP, EAF, IMA but also spaces that received no funding, or project funding only such as artist-run spaces and institutional spaces i.e. George Paton Gallery. The alternative space term was also used by studio based organisations such as Creative Space and even magazines such as Art Network.

The battle over funding for organizational space with its associated terminology reached a critical period with the development and establishment of Artspace in Sydney 1981-83. This was the point when the Australia Council established its policy for flagship organizations for contemporary art in each major city, to be called Contemporary Art Spaces.ⁱⁱ Artists fought to make Artspace artist-run but ultimately failed.ⁱⁱⁱ The establishment of this national network of Contemporary Art Spaces meant that artist-run spaces would be relegated to low level funding through project based programs.

The important thing about this decisive period in the early 1980's is that it ushered in a new kind of politicization of artists' space that has set the tone for debates surrounding funding to this day. Previous ideological disputes were more about the representation of experimental art practices in public galleries, the debates now moved into the role government has in shaping arts policy and therefore opportunities for artists. Artists realized they were now being 'managed' by an arts bureaucracy whose mission was to professionalise the sector. This meant artist run spaces unwittingly became the alternative in the 1980s as a result of government arts policy.

The idea of the alternative space has now become somewhat redundant, because artist run spaces have had to subscribe to arts policy to receive government funding including project funding.^{iv} They are now recognized as an important part of the visual arts infrastructure in Australia. This has resulted in 'professionalism' flowing through to artist-run spaces that was once referred to in the pejorative in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, there are those who cling to the attitude that the 1970s were the golden age of artist run activity.^v

However, professionalism is not synonymous with less options or freedom. It is also not necessarily akin to de-politicisation or co-option. Artist run organizations today have evolved out of these debates, focusing their quest for an ideological space within their organizations. This internalisation can potentially lead to a more critical assessment of practice and its role in broader social and political movements. In other words ideology has been absorbed into operational structures and artistic programs. I believe artist-run spaces can now make political statements through the art they chose to support and how their organizations are run.

While it is still necessary to engage government funding agencies in debate about funding to artist-run spaces, it is part of a discussion that is connected to a range of issues confronting artist-run organisations today. While change has been slow during the 14 years I have been involved with artist run spaces, there have been positive developments that bode well for these organisations. The ideological challenges facing artist run organizations now are concerned with translating the debates and lessons of the past into more sophisticated solutions. Using professionalism as a tool will allow artists organizations to support and explore more radical approaches to art practice.

Groups of individuals

Artists must negotiate a social duality of being an independent agent and a collective member. Through socialization and learning systems they generally develop fiercely individualistic ways of relating to the world. Their identity as an artist is based on their uniqueness as an individual. Yet, they are also very adept at collective work and group activity when they want to be. They may even crave group affirmation and distinguish their individual identity through group settings. These are normal socialising processes, but artists go through learning systems that reinforce notions of individuality above being a team player as espoused in sport for example. Even the general public expects artists to be individuals that come from a strange land they cannot fathom yet believe essential to the unique imagination of the artist. Mainstream art history to which the general public have a smattering of references is based on the individuals' creative struggle and uncompromising pursuit i.e. Van

Gogh, Picasso, Pollock, and locally the Heide phenomena with Tucker, Nolan and Percival etc.

This social duality puts the artist in an interesting position when it comes to organising a group of peers for an artist-run space while maintaining an individual practice. The relations of the group are based on individual aspirations—how their practice fits the organization and what they get out of it—as well as group dynamics that provide an organisational or collective voice. The attitudes and values of the individual may not always be in accord with the group. Tensions may be generated between the group and an individual, or between individuals within the group. Some of these tensions may be interpersonal others may be ideological or practical. If these tensions can be managed and utilised productively then the organization can benefit. This is where the difficulty lies, as the individual may not differentiate their individualist aspirations to those of the organization. There may be confusion as to what is for personal benefit and what is for the good of the organization. One could argue that these are a natural part of any collective or organization based on volunteer time, but in the case of artist run spaces these tensions need to be given opportunities for release.

Artist developed and co-ordinated projects are a good way of providing an outlet for ones creative practice with an organisational framework. In recent years I have been able to reconcile my lack of individual practice by co-ordinating collaborative and exchange projects. Though I normally do not make work for these projects, I do see myself as a collaborating member of the group, and thus producing creative ideas. In fact, these projects are generally developed with a creative rationale that provides a structure for response not dissimilar to a design brief. For example the Organisation for Cultural Exchange and Disagreement (OCED) project asked the Canadian and Australian artists to respond to a series of issues raised in a conversation between myself and the Canadian co-ordinator, Jonathan Middleton, prompting them “to ask questions about the bureaucratic / administrative overlay on the development of creative ideas and their modes of formation common amongst artist co-operatives, artist-run centres, and corporate of institutional identities used by artists.”^{vi}

It is often difficult to distinguish between individualist intentions and organisational good as many artist run spaces are generally led by their founders who also perform most of the work. Given that artists expect they will receive career benefits from being involved with an artist-run space in lieu of the volunteer time and effort they put in, it is hardly surprising that the interests of the key individuals are collapsed into the interests of their organization. This is exactly what the OCED project set out to interrogate: the conventional roles of artist, co-ordinator, director, curator and administrator within the art industry.

As Australian artist run spaces mature we are witnessing the development of better internal protocols and a higher expectation of their answerability to artists, audiences and funding bodies. Most obviously this is visible with organizations that are moving into recurrent funding programs and subsequently can pay staff, but also it is visible in spaces running for longer on a purely volunteer basis. What has not been stemmed is the rate at which artists leave their organizations. Generally, artists will stay involved for about 3 years before moving on, yet positively this no longer necessarily represents the demise of the organization. Importantly, the founders are prepared to

hand on the organization to another group of artists who may take the organization in a new direction. Over the last couple of years amongst Melbourne artist-run spaces there have been entirely new committees taking over at BUS, Seventh, Blindside, TCB and Platform. Importantly four of these spaces have been running for more than 6 years. This understanding that the organization has a life and role beyond the founders' aspirations demonstrates that artists are recognising that artist-run spaces have moved beyond being vehicles for individual aspirations; that they have a responsibility to artists per se and the industry itself.

So how do artist run spaces deal with key members leaving in terms of the organisations' ongoing development and the passing on of organisational knowledge? If there is overlap of members departing with arriving members then the knowledge can be passed on, yet the history of more established artist run spaces around the world indicates that a stable board or committee membership will enable a more robust and sustainable organization to be developed. It does depend on the history of the organisation and what its intentions are. In the case of First Draft in Sydney it is constituted that a new board of 'artist directors' will be appointed every two years. This has ensured new networks flow through the organization, but it has also kept it an operating level that cannot evolve. This level of operation could be considered commensurate to exhibiting primarily emerging artists. This in turn fits government funding policy towards artist run spaces

True Believers

It's ironic that there are workshops^{vii} and professional practice classes devoted to establishing your own artist-run space. Ironic, in the sense that the DIY approach of the unskilled (in terms of administration/business skills), spontaneous and reactionary formation of an artist-run space now has proscribed curricula like 'How to make a kids cubby house' at Bunnings. What often escapes when you start giving artists instructions on setting up their own artist-run space is *belief*. Why are you doing it? I mean why are you *really* doing it? This is not to deny that artists may not be in a position to fully understand why they set-up their space until it has been running for a couple of years. Yet, setting organisational goals from the outset—even though they will evolve—gives the members reference points, ballast if you like, when the honey moon is over and the going gets tough. When devotion and good will gets stretched. If the members know what the organization holds as its core values and the members live these values, then it will survive through tough times. As artist-run spaces move into the realm of artist-run institutions, the need for robust and well-articulated beliefs and values is paramount.

When West Space was established in 1993 we were reacting against a system that had become overly commercial gallery centred. When the recession hit around 1990, the art economy went into withdrawal with the associated pain, especially for artists. Because I emerged into this climate in 1991 with little expectation and enormous distrust of a system premised on art as commodity, myself and many of my peers went about constructing own support systems. We were reacting against the excessiveness of the 80s, while challenging the role commercial galleries played in the support of contemporary art. In fact we were often openly oppositional to commercial galleries, generally dismissing them outright. Setting up in the Western suburbs, we were also challenging the geographic centre of art in Melbourne was

based in the inner east and south-east; given that these areas were connected to the same socio-economic groups that had sown and reaped from the good times of the 1980's.

These reasons boiled down into a call to action; for artists to take responsibility for their modes of reception. We believed artists could make a difference to a system that demonstrated it was not capable of representing their best and truest interests. One has to remember the climate to which these values developed in terms of their legacy to West Space. But most importantly these embedded values provide West Space with a belief system that continues to be developed and sharpened as the organisation matures.

An oppositional perspective also pervaded the formation of Inhibodress in 1970. Though in this time the arguments were concerned with the indifference of public galleries—especially state galleries—to new practices in contemporary art. Additionally the absence of a serious commercial gallery sector fuelled this group of artists led by Mike Parr, Peter Kennedy and Tim Johnson to establish a space that challenged conventions by presenting experimental and hybrid practices, that tested the boundaries of what goes into a gallery. Moreover it challenged audiences to engage in process based work and cross-artform work in an environment that looked very different to other galleries then operating; previously used as a factory for garment making, it was very unusual at that time to run a gallery in an ex-industrial space.

I asked Peter Kennedy^{viii} about the what kind of impact running an artist run space early on in his career has had on the development of his practice and his attitudes to the art system. He has 'followed and independent course of action' that has been largely outside the commercial gallery sector. He uses terms such as 'non-conformism, resistant perversity, residual radicalism and persistent iconoclasm' to describe his practice. These are provoking terms that indicate the kind of values to which Inhibodress was founded, and continue to manifest themselves in Kennedy's work.

The influences and experiences artists obtain from establishing artist-run organisations can have a large bearing on their practice and attitudes to the artworld. As Kennedy states, 'drawing identity as an artist' is a powerful function of an artist-run space. My unequivocal experience has been that West Space has been the most significant influence on my attitudes towards the art system and in turn my practice. Kennedy's claim that 'Inhibodress embodied innocence and naiveté on the one hand and on the other political and natural cunning' rings very familiar to the founding of West Space, and probably many other artist run spaces.

I am unsure whether artist-run spaces today recognise that 'generating a friction through rubbing up against something' can be constructive. Socio-economic and political conditions of today are quite different to those of the early 1970s or early 1990s. However, there are still plenty of things that generate friction for artists both in the art system and their practice. The possibilities for artist-run organizations responding to specific issues as their reason for existence is under developed in this country.^{ix} It's still up to artists to make the difference.

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ⁱ Sontag, Susan *In America*, Picador 2001 p.175

ⁱⁱ For more on the history of the alternative spaces and artist run spaces in Australia see Jones, Brett *An Ideology of Space: The Formation of artist-run organizations in Australia*, Organisation for Cultural Exchange and Disagreement (OCED), West Space, 2004 also at <http://www.westspace.org.au/editorial>

ⁱⁱⁱ Downie, Christopher VAB calls scrum Spectators Delirious, Art Network No.6, 1981

^{iv} Australia Council Artist Run Initiative funding see <http://www.ozco.gov.au> Also see the Report of the Contemporary Visual Arts and Craft Inquiry 2002 especially pp. 202-206 for how the Australia Council views artist run organisations.

http://www.dcita.gov.au/arts_culture/consultation_and_submissions/cvac_inquiry/report

^v See HOFFIE, Pat Less Options, More Expensive NAVA Newsletter March/May 2004.

^{vi} Organisation for Cultural Exchange and Disagreement (OCED) p.51. West Space 2004. This project was the second Organisation project, the first being Organisation for Cultural Exchange and Mishap (OCEM) 2003 which was an exchange project with Para/Site Art Space in Hong Kong. More more information see:

<http://www.westspace.org.au/archive/projects>

^{vii} See for example the 2006 Adelaide Festival workshops on setting up an ARI

<http://runartistrun.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.anat.org.au/projects/mediastate/partnerprojects/ariworkshops.html>

^{viii} Interview by the author with Peter Kennedy, 2 February 2007. All quotes from this same interview.

^{ix} See organizations overseas such as:

Superflex <http://www.superflex.net>

Temporary Services <http://www.temporaryservices.org>

N55 <http://www.n55.dk>

AVL <http://www.ateliervanlieshout.com>

Tribe <http://www.tribeinc.org>