

## AN IDEOLOGY OF SPACE: THE FORMATION OF ARTIST RUN ORGANISATIONS IN AUSTRALIA

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Artist run organisations have held a contested space since their earliest beginnings. Whether it be the Contemporary Art Society with the Angry Penguins in the late 1930s or Inhibodress in the early 1970s, artists have challenged the sanctioned institutions of the time by creating their own opportunities for exhibition and dialogue. Artist run organizations have these tensions imbedded in their ideological shared histories—‘even their name has been the subject of heated debate over the years’.<sup>1</sup> They continue to grapple with the institutionalising affects of industry recognition, often juxtaposed with the individualist ambitions of the artists involved.

This piece of writing provides a cursory charting of some of the debates surrounding the development of artist run culture in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s. It begins with Inhibodress in 1970, widely considered our first artist run space within the context of contemporary models, and traces a selection of issues that have come to shape artist-run activity in Australia.

The often paradoxical and even confounding nature of art practice is echoed in artist-organised space. Many tensions and contradictions are generated due to a specialised field of knowledge which requires public support and recognition. Artists develop specialised and often idiosyncratic modes of communication, that are often reliant on public sector support (funding) and societal support (publicity and sales). Yet, there is a constant battle with the artist wanting to maintain the integrity of their work without acquiescing to the economic and social demands of mainstream culture. It is said that a primary function of art is to remain independent from dominant social and political trends so that it may perform the crucial function of social critique. Art (in the broadest sense of the word) that matters will hold a mirror up to the accepted standards and values of the day, challenging our preconceptions of what constitutes a civilized society. This is really the foundation of Modernism, and artist run activity as we now know it is very much a product of Modernism.

More specifically, the idea of a critically engaged practice that is always challenging the status quo is a legacy of the avant-garde. Broadly speaking this is the most significant point of agreement that is shared by all producers and presenters of contemporary art whether they be museums, state galleries, public galleries or artist run spaces. They all wish to challenge and confront the expectations of their audiences. Indeed the term ‘contemporary art’, frequently used in conjunction with ‘new art’ describes art that is at the vanguard, leading the cultural debate.

However, this is where agreement ends, because just which art is more radical and which organisations are more relevant to contemporary practice is always being debated. Artists themselves especially through their collectives and organizations drive much of the debate on what constitutes experimental and radical practice. The Australia Council has called them ‘radical incubators for emerging contemporary art’. Yet, artist run spaces do more than just provide a seeding and propagation service to the industry. And here lies the heart of the difference. It is between the artists’ proclamation of self-determination, and their dependence on institutional support. Therefore the notion of ‘the institution’ becomes replicable and mobile as artists seek to explore their own modes of administration and management within the bigger frame of social bureaucracy.

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The formalist tradition of the avant-garde which reached notoriety through Greenberg and the American abstract artists, was being rejected by the late 1960s. A different strain of vanguard activity was gaining prominence which challenged the sanctity of the art object and its materiality. This break happened in the late 1960s and early 70s when ‘ephemeral art forms such as performance art and concept art, community projects and collectives rejected formalist associations between aesthetics and the avant-garde’.<sup>2</sup>

In Australia the debate around what constituted avant-garde art was highlighted in the way the Inhibodress (1970–72) founders contrasted their ideas of radical art to that of Central Street (established in 1966). ‘In reacting against the ‘formalist’ tenets of Central Street, Inhibodress was rejecting the work of artists who hitherto had been the most advanced, the nearest thing to a local avant-garde’.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Millner, Jacqueline Something, but not critical, *Critical Spaces*, Artspace, Sydney, 1995

<sup>2</sup> Kleinert, Sylvia Rescuing the Avant-garde, *Endangered Spaces*, ARI, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Kramer, Sue *Inhibodress 1970-1972*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1989

Peter Kennedy proclaimed 'Inhibodress requires no sales capability and is therefore free to promote all aspects of the avant-garde'.<sup>4</sup> The reference to 'all aspects of the avant-garde' is a direct challenge to the work exhibited in galleries such as Central Street. These distinctions were mainly borne out by individual art practices that in turn shaped the ideological position of the gallery. In this sense it is important to note that Parr, Kennedy and Johnson participated in The Situation Now, Object or Post-Object Art at Central Street in 1971 and after the closure of their space, presented Information 2 Inhibodress Archive/Department at Central Street in 1974.

Yet, the Inhibodress artists were staking a claim to a new avant-garde not based on colour field and hard edge abstract painting as epitomised at Central Street. It has been argued whether Central Street constituted an artist run gallery or alternative space or not.<sup>5</sup> Irrespective of its classification, Central Street provided a crucial context for generating debate on the most current art in Australia. These debates would evolve in the early 70s to challenge the role of art galleries and the art they exhibited. 'Central Street was less viewed as a precedent' by Inhibodress members 'than as a position to react vigorously against'.<sup>6</sup> Inhibodress members were even more dismissive of the Yellow House with its 'self indulgent amalgam of Sixties Happenings and tired Surrealism'.<sup>7</sup>

The media release announcing the opening of Inhibodress stated several radical differences to other galleries at the time, most notably it being 'initiated, financed and maintained solely by artists' and being 'a non-profit proposition'.<sup>8</sup> This makes a clear break with previous collectives and groups of artists who were not so emphatic on the role of artists in initiating and managing their organisations'. It is also significant that earlier groups such as the Contemporary Art Society did not attach their identity to physical space. Inhibodress conceptualised the ordinariness of a former light industrial factory to connections with everyday social activity; 'art was a functioning thing and had to be demystified'.<sup>9</sup> The space itself also represented a break with gallery convention.

Inhibodress was very clear in its ambitions to make contact and work with artists overseas. At the time there was an absence of dedicated funding to the visual arts. The Visual Arts Board (VAB) of the Australia Council was yet to be established. Therefore Inhibodress being largely self-funded had to cleverly utilise its limited financial resources. International exchanges would often take the form of 'mail art'. Works such as printed matter, photographs, audio material, film and video 'could be exchanged between Australia and the world without the burdensome costs of freight, customs, insurance etc., thus contributing to the artists' sense of their own independence and control'.<sup>10</sup> Peter Kennedy notes that 'the Canadians were perhaps the greatest exponents of mail art' through groups in Vancouver such as Image Bank and 'personalities' such as Mr Peanut, Dr Brute, Marcel Idea and Anna Banana<sup>11</sup>, several of whom would be directly involved in the establishment of Western Front in 1973.

'Australia is at last in a position to contribute to world culture'<sup>12</sup>, proclaimed Tim Johnson in 1970. Indeed, Inhibodress characterised this new model of the alternative space not only in Australia, but it was amongst the first anywhere in the world. It had an urgency that reflected the upheavals and social changes taking place across the globe. And thus Inhibodress artists recognised their need to engage in an international dialogue; 'Inhibodress intends to reconcile the local avant-garde with the most progressive international art'.<sup>13</sup>

It was not so much the idea of the avant-garde itself being contested, but more about artists in Australia attempting to negotiate their role within major developments in contemporary art overseas. Inhibodress would be recognised as perhaps the first alternative art space in Australia and a blueprint for artist-run spaces to this day. And while the term avant-garde has particular historical associations that are no longer palatable, the signifiers of this canon permeate the activities of many artist-run galleries today.

Vanguard practice, as history had said it would, became absorbed into a fast developing infrastructure for contemporary Australian art in the 1970s. If the Heidelberg School's self-initiated and organised 9x5 Impressions exhibition in 1889 represented the first marker of artist run activity in Australia, then the cycle of transformation and

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Kennedy interview, Kramer, *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Tony McGillick, a founder, effectively frames it as a commercial gallery that did not operate on the basis of consensus (*Other Voices*, Vol.1, No.2 1970), yet Paul McGillick with hindsight emphasises the gallery running as a co-operative that made little money from sales (*Art Network* 6, 1982)

<sup>6</sup> Kramer, *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Mike Parr interview, Kramer, *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Kennedy, Peter Inhibodress: Just for the Record, *Art Network*, No.6, 1982

<sup>9</sup> Tim Johnson interview, Kramer, *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Kramer, *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Peter Kennedy interview, Kramer, *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> Kramer, *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> Kennedy, Peter Inhibodress: Just for the Record, *Art Network*, No.6, 1982

absorption became an institutionalising practice in the 1970s with direct and ongoing government support for a new type of contemporary art organization known as an 'alternative space'.

In the early 1970s the excitement that surrounded the development of conceptual approaches to art in Australia started to become formalised and government sanctioned. The ground work that Inhibodress laid was soon to develop into more sustainable models such as the Experimental Art Foundation (Adelaide). Whereas Inhibodress was initiated, funded and curated by artists, the EAF would realise a more sustainable vision, but no less radical in terms of its art, built on government support. Noel Sheridan and Donald Brook, the latter having taken a keen interest in the activities of Inhibodress during its two years of operation, built an ideological and theoretical framework for the EAF that was informed by the most current ideas and practices from overseas.

Formed as a reaction to the stultifying attitudes and practices of the modern art museum, the new art practices required an entirely new approach to negotiating art with its audience. They were 'no longer indexed to the exhibition functions of art galleries and museums but identified and supported wholly by processes of peer validation'.<sup>14</sup> Alternative space argued, as the name suggests, for a new experience with art that was much more connected with forms of social and political engagement. In other words the new practices of conceptual, process, temporal and performance art all required a new contextualizing framework that would be sympathetic and aware of their intentions. Though this framework did not always require physical space conceptually, it did need a place to call home, which became known as the alternative space.

Three government supported alternative spaces were established 1974-5: IMA (Brisbane), ACP (Sydney) and EAF (Adelaide). All were dependent on Visual Arts Board funding to begin operating. Other alternative spaces not supported by the VAB were established in the early 1970s notably Tin Sheds (Sydney) and Ewing and George Paton Galleries (Melbourne), were associated with tertiary education institutions, while Praxis (Perth) began as an artists' co-operative in 1974 to become a VAB funded space from 1981.

In the late 1970's artist-run activity remerged with a more diversified sense of what constituted self-determined space. Studio space became a major bone of contention especially in Sydney with organizations such as Creative Space—taking cues from the London S.P.A.C.E organization—making concerted efforts to obtain affordable working premises for artists. Closely aligned to Creative Space was the magazine *Art Network*, recognising itself as an artists' space and overt in its support of artist run organizations in Australia.

For a long time in Australia ... there have been grass roots activities, events and happenings which have never seen the light of day...In just the last few years the climate has changed. This change has not been so much with the traditional media, but rather has been initiated by artists themselves...*Art Network*, a magazine produced by artists, attempts to facilitate this process and to fill the communication gap left by traditional media.<sup>15</sup>

*Art Projects* was established in Melbourne in early 1979 by John Nixon 'after years of complacency by the private galleries and National Galleries'. Nixon claimed that 'Art Projects in every aspect of its exhibition and research program posited a radical alternative'.<sup>16</sup> If *Art Projects* 'functioned as a prototype/model for the exhibition of Australian avant-garde art' then its ideological parallel is *Inhibodress* from several years earlier; notably Mike Parr was a regular exhibitor at *Art Projects*. *Art Projects*, though artist initiated and determined, ultimately sought to provide a legitimising context for experimental activities through institutional recognition. Receiving government grants from 1981, it leads the second wave of artist-run activity, with a more savvy and aware engagement with institutions. Its conception and management largely based around a single person also makes a break with the fluid co-operative models of the late 60s and early 1970s. Significantly, it lasted for six years with this operating model.

Up until the late 1970s the term 'alternative space' collapsed artist run organizations with public or government supported spaces. However with an increasing number of artists and a growing contemporary art infrastructure, these government supported spaces became the linchpins in a national visual arts strategy. Thus around 1981-82 with the formation of *Artspace* (Sydney) a decisive battle took place that established the distinction between contemporary art spaces and artist run spaces. Though the term continued to be used into the late 1980s, the notion of alternative space had run its course by 1982. These government funded 'alternatives' were now firmly rooted in a burgeoning arts bureaucracy.

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<sup>14</sup> Murphy, Bernice *Alternative Spaces Art Network*, No.6, 1982

<sup>15</sup> Editorial, *Art Network* No. 2, Spring 1980

<sup>16</sup> Nixon, John *Art Projects 1979 – 84*, *Art and Text*, no.28 1988

At the time this division was bitterly contested by artist run organizations because they realised that they were being shut out of the newly developing national funding network that was building the contemporary art space infrastructure. Arts professionals and bureaucrats steering the development of contemporary art spaces had a certain idea of professionalism. From the debates surrounding the formation of Artspace we can see that this was a crucial issue for artists: 'The most important issue to come out of the meeting was the composition of any artists committee running such a space'.<sup>17</sup>

It is of interest that the term 'alternative space' was being replaced by 'contemporary art space' and 'artist-run space' as the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council was developing its framework for a national network of key organizations. There simply was not room for a spectrum of different funded organizations under the 'alternative space' banner.

Artists in Sydney criticised 'funding bodies which end up supporting institutional structures which mirror their own framework of professional responsibility, and hence allocating money to buildings and managers, rather than to projects and artists'.<sup>18</sup> This was the view of Juilee Pryor and Robert McDonald who ran the artist run initiative Art Unit 1981 – 1984. They disputed the establishment of key organizations in each state, understanding that alternative spaces required different models to represent the depth and difference of artist activity.

The contemporary art space policy was developed in a reactive way to the demands of established organizations and institutions. 'The fact that the VAB's development of detailed policy in the alternative spaces area was not initially formulated in a unified way, but divided by the headings CAS and ARS, appears to have compounded the problem'.<sup>19</sup> With the initial concept of the contemporary art space the VAB determined that they would receive assistance for the first three years of operation beginning the first three year cycle in 1983. By the end of the third year they were 'expected to attain a general level of self-sufficiency'<sup>20</sup> from where they would move onto project funding.

This was in fact an unsustainable proposition and dumped a year or so later. But it provides an example of the uncertainty in the early development of contemporary art spaces in Australia.

The categories of contemporary art space and artist run space (now often interchanged with 'artist-run initiative') have been cemented through defined funding programs with specific funding criteria supported through a national policy framework. Out of these debates from the early 1980s also grew a politicisation of artist organised activity. As funding bodies placed more bureaucratic demands on recipients, contemporary art spaces became defined as key organizations, and artist run organisations claimed their space as genuine 'alternatives' to contemporary art spaces.

Art Network is perhaps the best source for recording artist run activity from 1979 – 1985 (though it tends to be Sydney focussed). It was a significant period for raising voices and awareness of artist run activity in Australia. In two 1982 issues of Art Network (#6 & #7), Bernice Murphy presents a historically and internationally contextualised discussion of alternative spaces. While not directly engaging with the divisions occurring under this banner at the time, other articles in the same issues provide a sense of the debates being waged.

By the mid 1980s the contemporary art space network had been consolidated with Canberra Contemporary Art Space, ACCA (Melbourne), Chameleon (Hobart), Art Space (Sydney) and Praxis (Perth) joining the key organizations funding program. The activities of organizations in this network were well documented in the Brown Report from 1985.<sup>21</sup> This national network received substantial amounts of government funding on a continuing basis, yet artist run organisations had not had their funding needs addressed. The Visual Arts Board commissioned a report on artist-run spaces which was published in May 1987, also undertaken by Karilyn Brown. This report presented a series of well substantiated and practical recommendations, fundamentally 'that the Visual Arts Board establish a formal program of assistance for artist-run spaces and formulate policy guidelines through which grant allocations can be made'.<sup>22</sup>

Though belated and after the demise of many spaces, the report did address the crucial question of what the Visual Arts Board is doing about support for artist run-spaces. Specific amounts of funding and categories were proposed in the recommendations. And while many recommendations were not implemented or took many years to be adequately

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<sup>17</sup> Downie, Christopher VAB calls scrum Spectators Delirious, Art Network, No. 6, 1981

<sup>18</sup> Jackson, Mark Alternative Spaces to Critical Spaces, The changing critical Role of Artist Run Initiatives Over the Last Decade, First Draft, Sydney, 1995

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, Peter Art Monthly 1989.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, ibid

<sup>21</sup> Brown, Karilyn & Aquino, John Review of Visual Arts Board's Program of Assistance for Contemporary Art Spaces, Australia Council, 1985

<sup>22</sup> Brown, Karilyn Artist-run Spaces, Visual Arts Craft Board, 1987

addressed, the report placed the important role of artist run spaces within a national framework. Specific policy could now be developed; artist-run spaces were now firmly on the agenda.

Yet this report also signalled the paradoxical issue of institutional recognition and institutionalisation. Art Unit (1981-84) were never able to resolve this issue, voicing opposition to any bureaucratic overlays that came with government funding yet at the same time requiring it—and fighting for it—to survive. The inability to reconcile the role of government support with its ideological position inevitably precipitated Art Units' implosion.

The establishment of First Draft (West) in 1985 represented a more practical consolidation of funding exigencies with ideological positions. In a sense organizations such as Art Unit who operated in the early 1980s set out the debates and difficulties overtly so that subsequent organizations would have a greater sense of where their energies should be located. This integration of ideology and longer term survival was manifested from the outset at First Draft. The founders consulted directly with the Visual Arts Craft board, being determined to secure funding from the beginning. The two year group directorship model at First Draft ensured it would allow flexibility and diversity of programming. Equity and access have been central tenets at First Draft. First Draft represented a different emphasis on the role of the artist-run space as an organisational model to be recognised in its own right, rather than necessarily through the particular artists involved.

This focus on the big picture issues concerning artist run activity necessitated direct engagement with the current debates of the time. In 1987 First Draft initiated the Hindsight forum, which included Karilyn Brown from VAB, and Juilee Pryor and Rob McDonald from Art Unit, Jeff Gibson and Judy Annear. This forum and the surrounding discussions represented an important positioning activity for First Draft and artist-run spaces. It recognised the debates of the proceeding years and how they shaped the (then) current situation of artist-run spaces.<sup>23</sup> It also reflected First Draft's approach of direct engagement with the VAB as part of its longer term sustainability.

However, the sustainability of artist-run space was to meet its greatest challenge in the mid to late 1980s with souring real estate prices producing dramatic rises in the cost of space. While increases occurred nationally, Sydney saw the most pronounced increases. The Endangered Spaces exhibition, forum and publication in 1989 brought these issues into focus. Initiated by artists with experienced involvement with artist-run activity, including Tes Howitz from First Draft, the project elucidated the contested situation of artist-run space practically (exhibition/studio space) and ideologically (radical alternative).

The late 1980s economic bubble forced the closure of many artist-run spaces around Australia. Artists realised they could no longer rely on the affordable provision of space to survive, other strategies had to be pursued.

Artists are beginning to realise they may need a more sophisticated and unified response to the complex issues of...stabilization of studio spaces, maintenance of alternative exhibition and publishing concerns.<sup>24</sup>

Thus by the late 1980s the artist-run space had grown up. Artists realised the support they argued for was not going to come easily nor to everyone. They realised that they were operating in a market based economy that would pay little heed to artists arguing for special treatment. Artists had to work much more closely with government bureaucracies and respond to their criteria to find the support they required. Some artists saw this as an inherent problem:

The degree of bureaucratisation that is now needed is in direct conflict with artists' requirements in order to maintain their own practice; an individual struggle which parallels the broader one.<sup>25</sup>

However, in the end the debate is not really about physical space. As has been witnessed since the property boom of the late 1990s, artist run spaces will always find a means to operate. The debate is about ideological space. It is the persistent embodiment of the radical avant-garde in artist-organised space. The belief that artists must challenge the social precepts, test their validity and always explore alternatives.

Artists will need to continually shift position to adopt strategic guerrilla tactics, sidestepping and infiltrating bureaucratic and institutional procedures in order to gain space for ideas. For this they will need the continuation and co-operation of the alternative art spaces.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mark Jackson provides a very good analysis of this period in the First Draft book

<sup>24</sup> Downie, Christopher Cutting the Fringe, Endangered Spaces, ARI, 1989

<sup>25</sup> Downie, *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> Kleinert, *ibid*

This is a prescient statement from 1989 because it raises so many of the contradictory and confounding issues that surround critical practices by artists and their organizations today. Interestingly it places a burden of responsibility on the actions of artist-run organizations to ensure 'alternatives' continue to be initiated. However, the idea of infiltration is not so relevant today with many government funding bodies having informed staff and acute sensitivity of the difficult issues involved. Additionally, peer review processes bring artists directly into the decision making process.

The dichotomy between artist-run space and the normalising effects of bureaucratisation will never be reconciled. Yet, as artist-run spaces build larger administrative structures, they must be wary of becoming less flexible and responsive to what artists desire and need. Tension and disagreement will be generated because funding bodies will require the organization to be more accountable. Artist-run organizations will need to develop more administrative protocol and procedures. Yet this infrastructure may also irrevocably shift the values and beliefs of the organization. At some point the organization may develop into a different kind of organization, completely breaking with its artist initiated roots.<sup>27</sup>

Others may use this tension to stimulate debate and creative outcomes. Indeed there is no tangible evidence to suggest that artists utilizing the tools of bureaucracy to run their organizations necessarily undermines their creative outcomes or core values. Rather as evidenced in artist organised activity in different parts of the world, more sophisticated methods of operation that adopt bureaucratic and business structures can offer greater impact. There is no right or wrong model of operation for artist organised activities. It is more important that artists continue to claim ideological spaces that consider broader political and social implications.

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<sup>27</sup> Witness the development of Praxis (Perth), first as an artist-run collective then a contemporary art space before being absorbed into the establishment of PICA (Perth Institute of Contemporary Art).