Unit Structures

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Artist-run organizations have been operating in Australia since the early 1970s with pretty much the same model; one essentially based on a group of artists acting in volunteer capacities to curate, administer and manage the operations of their organizations. They charge fees for artists to exhibit because even if they receive government funding the amounts are insufficient to cover basic operating costs i.e. rent. However they are non-profit, and therefore generally do not take commissions on the sale of work. Their programs are normally run on an application or proposal basis and tend to represent the innovative and experimental side of art practice, and so often support less established artists.

Artist-run spaces or artist-run initiatives (ARIs) as they are commonly called in Australia, are largely space based. Whilst, some loose collectives or groups of artists have attempted to establish non-space based organizations they have not been understood as ongoing concerns with regular programs of activity and have tended not to commission or solicit projects outside their established groups; instead operating as collaborative groups or networks.

In this text I want to focus on internal factors that affect the development and growth of an organization, rather than external ones such as government funding. It is easy to presume that a lack of funding is the primary 'cause and affect' reason for an artist-run space being unable to grow and survive, but there are many reasons, often interlinked, that can impact on the ability of an organization to realise even basic ambitions i.e. to run for 3 years. Funding, depending on its terms, will give an organisation a leg-up and some security, but it does not account for the creative outcomes, the commitment, energy, leadership, skills, or unique vision of an organization. These things are all supplied by people.

My main argument is straight forward; that the people involved are the critical ingredient in determining whether an artist-run organization will survive and grow. Naturally there will be external factors that will influence how the organization evolves and grows, but essentially it is the people running the space that make the difference. Subsequently this notion of growth is contingent on the ambitions of the people running the organization.

Some organizations do not see themselves as needing to grow, they just do what they do and hope to be operating next year. So the first factor that determines what kind of vision the organisation establishes comes from the people who run it, who are also the founders. The founders set the mission, they establish the operating model and give the organisation its personality. From the outset the organization is dependent on key individuals who not only become indispensable because they do most of the volunteer work that allows

it to operate, but they also infuse the organization with what it does and what it is.

However what happens when the founding member/s decide they have had enough, or their personal circumstances impact on their ability to run the organization, or their art career takes off? Often they close the space down because the branding is inextricably linked to them; the individuals who founded it. It is their vision and their work, put simply they own it, just like a small business, but unlike a small business it has no market value so it cannot be sold. It just disappears, and is added to the list of defunct artist-run spaces.

Given that artist-run organizations are by definition run by artists, a couple of significant issues will have a bearing on their sustainability. Firstly, artists generally do not have business or management training, and secondly their career as a practicing artist is their main concern. Whilst the former can be overcome through training and assistance from relevant professionals, the second issue is more difficult especially where the positions in their organizations are unpaid. The compounded financial pressure of a practice that does not pay and an organization that cannot pay wages forces many artists to make a decision of what must come first.

It is possible to learn the skills of running a small organization on the job, as I did with West Space, but at a certain point, support from professionals such as lawyers, accountants and marketing specialists will be required. This point usually arrives when organizations receive larger sums of government money and so are expected to become professionalised and accountable. Organisations such as West Space believe that they can have greater impact in the industry, present a more ambitious program of activities and work for artists more comprehensively if they are properly resourced.

In fact, we had a clear vision that West Space was going to be a long-term proposition. If it were to affect change in the industry, the organization had to become an entity in its own right, rather than an extension of our personal careers or personalities. In many instances the running of the organization took precedence over my own practice. I have always understood West Space as a professional service organization. When it is able to work better and more effectively, it can in turn do more for artists. In a sense, West Space is a politically motivated organization because through action and example it believes that artists can lead the industry in ways beyond their creative practice. Artists can represent the best interests of other artists and contemporary art though unique and professionally managed organizations; artists as professional managers is not a contradiction in terms.

Career ambitions play a critical role in the potential of an artist-run organization. If it’s a vehicle for those running it to realise personal career aspirations as an artist, then it will necessarily be short term. If those running the space do so on a volunteer basis, their time and energy will be finite, also leading to immense pressures. The organization is placed in a bind in this

situation; if it wishes to operate longer term it needs to secure funding to pay staff, and so will have to build more infrastructure and administrative protocols. This may be anathema to the spirit of the organization, and those who run it. They may see it as becoming 'institutionalised' or 'bureaucratised' with an unwanted accountability to external parties. However, other artist-run organisations may recognise their organization as bigger and more important than themselves, be prepared to both share its ownership and at some point hand this on (remembering it has no market value in a financial sense).

In this case the organization has the potential to be a long term proposition with solid development prospects. However getting to the point where the organization is sustainable through key personnel changes necessitates a written constitution, documented administrative procedures and a strategic/business plan which is the guiding document, in terms of what the organization does and how it goes about this business. It is easy to say these things, but for an organization without paid staff, these things are very difficult to achieve.

The structure of the organization will become a critical issue when the constitution and strategic plan are being developed. Most artist-run spaces begin as a collective of peers who share similar understandings of contemporary art and their place in it and often arise out of social networks. Therefore they have fairly loose structures where the authority rests with the individuals who do the work and hierarchies are avoided (or perhaps denied) in favour of collective ownership exercised through consensus decision-making, though there are normally some individuals who hold more authority either through their establishment of the space or the administrative roles they fulfil within the organisation.

However in Australia most non-profit arts organizations have a hierarchical structure imposed upon them as they need to become Incorporated Associations to be eligible for funding and tax deductible gifts (philanthropy). This is a legally binding arrangement where certain obligations must be met.[1] In reality most incorporated artist-run spaces only loosely follow these rules, if at all. They may not be a problem for an organization whilst its remains small and receives minimal amounts of government funding. However, if it does wish to grow and receive ongoing government support, then its constitution (Rules of Association) will be scrutinised in terms of how they are exercised and followed. At this level, if the Rules are not followed there can be serious ramifications for the organization and its committee or board members.

The next step is for the organization to modify the Model Rules of Association to reflect its practices or write its own Rules of Association. West Space is beginning the process of writing its own Rules of Association. An important

[1] Most artist-run spaces use what are called the Model Rules under the Incorporations Act as their constitution. They specify a structure with certain protocols - most importantly they state that the organization will have six committee members including four office bearer roles. These office bearer roles; president, vice-president, treasurer and secretary have certain responsibilities attached.

question relates to just who makes up the committee or board of an artist-run organization. Naturally there will be artists, but lawyers, accountants and other non-artist professional may be required. These individuals will bring different expectations and understandings to the organization, which may affect its mission and goals. The successful integration of non-artists onto the committee or board comes back to the leadership of the artists steering the organization.

In this scenario it is critical that the organization has a clearly defined mission and statement of purpose with objectives attached. This needs to be established by the artists running the organization, and will generally only become clear after several years of operation. The professionals with specific skills brought in to help the organization need to subscribe to the mission and objectives in place. It is up to the artist members to ensure that they stay true to their vision. Even as the organization grows and adopts more administrative procedures and protocols, it should stay true to its vision, and always refer to it.

The internal culture of an organization will be reflected in its program of activities and how they are managed. In many ways the internal culture of artist-run spaces is richer, more adventurous and more personable than other visual arts organizations because artists are setting this culture. Artists must still lead their organizations, but they cannot do it without support from non-artists if they want to provide ambitious and ongoing opportunities for artists and contemporary art.

In the follow-up to this article, I will explore some specific examples of how artist-run spaces have negotiated their growth and transformation into artist-run institutions.

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