

SERVILE YOUTH

'There's been a lot of talk about the 'revolt of contemporary youth' of late. There's been a lot of talk about it because...it is fundamentally such a half-assed and inoffensive sort of revolt.'

- the Sound & the Fury, IS no.1 1958¹

In the broody aftermath of the last Australian federal election, a recurring figure in the analysis became that of the 'aspirational voter'. People so described were conceived as those who had (at least partly) turned from the concept of public administration and investment in core societal frameworks like health care, welfare and education, instead choosing expenditure in privatised sectors as a means to ultimately secure personal wealth and improved quality of life. Or more explicitly, 'aspirational voters...are people who like to see governments making the rich richer because they're hoping to be rich themselves one day.'² From the spectre of the aspirational voter and their complicity in perpetuating ghastly governments and degrading public services, one might draw correspondence in defining the 'aspirational artist'. Similarly ambivalent towards an infrastructure that struggles to foster either the financial or intellectual prosperity of its stakeholders, more often than not the interests of contemporary visual artists embrace strategies of individual mobility before the ethics of collective responsibility as participants in a landscape of making and thinking about art. Of special concern is the new guard of young &/or emerging artists (variously defined in the bureau-speak as under 27 or 35 and within the first five years of practice), many graduates of tertiary art institutions high on 'professional practice' *i.e.* an education instructive in functioning competitively and successfully within the existing art system (how to do grant applications, how to write on your slides *etc*), possibly at the expense of instilling methods of critical thinking, questioning and means to exert influence or suggest change within such a system. Increasingly one result is a faltering concept of artist 'initiative', with artist-run gallery and exhibition projects near homogenised in mimicry of the platforms and professionalism of funded institutions and commercial galleries, inadvertently perpetuating typical power hierarchies and barely managing to engage or foster counter-currents in debate and practice. Just as 'in societies in which ideology is seldom seen and rarely heard, it stands to reason that voters will focus on living standards as part of a general desire to improve their lot'³, a prevailing body of contemporary practitioners would appear fixated on exposure over development, personal progression before communal contribution. Here we have a generation in itself looking to be seen rather than heard...from sonic to servile.

In some ways this might be equally attributed to the well rooted and pervasive undervaluing of artists own networks (by both themselves and other parties), at least until touched by the validating hand of commercial and/or institutional contact. Thinking locally, it is debatable whether any of the current platforms for exhibition are sufficiently motivated or capable of engaging active strategies of self-assessment and restructure such as would be required to engender an interesting art scene. Which when tabled with the frequently awesome and consistent passivity of artists, lack of voiced criticism (in a small scene evidently seen as an inhibitor to future professional opportunity) and the mush designed to pass as critical commentary in arts and mainstream media, would more than ever appear to posit a circumstance of **no alternative**. Artists might well aspire to professional status and recognition, but need they participate in an uninterrogated hierarchy of self-interests in a stifled climate, effectively insulated from the urgencies of contemporary political and social crises (think Aboriginal reconciliation, think treatment of asylum seekers), self-congratulating in its own inanity and self-important to the point of obscuring its own shortcomings? It's uninspiring, to say the least. Instead we might look to disassemble and truly scrutinise the frameworks that scaffold contemporary practice and exhibition in local contexts, so as to reassess and affirm what to aspire to and hopefully locate an active, stimulating and workable ethic of practice, one insistent on complexity and heterogeneity, in the process.

¹ 'Leaving the 20th Century- The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International' Christopher Gray (ed./translation), Rebel Press 1998 p7.

² Ross Gittins 'Picking the Pockets of the Peters' *The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)* 8/5/02.

³ Gerard Henderson 'Just a fancy word for the up and coming' *SMH* 11/12/01.

A recent piece in the opinion pages of the Sydney Morning Herald queried 'What happened to the voice of dissent? We need it back *now*', and that 'musicians, artists and film-makers are supposed to rally against right wing governments - aren't they?'⁴ Here the ongoing dilemma presented by the current government's self-styled regime on behalf of the so-called moral majority is found to be wanting for voiced criticism and opposition from the artistic community. A lecturer in history, the writer proposes that 'dissent is there, but it's becoming harder to find (or perhaps just harder to motivate). There is a lot of despair and sadness over the policies of the Howard Government...'⁵, and to some extent locates the responsibility for continuity of protest with young people: 'maybe protest and dissent are losing their traditional regenerative base - university students - as activism becomes a luxury most students feel they can't afford.'⁶ Tellingly, a swathe of letters to the editor the next day were grouped under the title 'Unpopular opinion keeps backlash in the background'⁷, where readers lost no time in pointing out that the writer's 'left-wing opinions aren't popular opinion.'⁸ Together with such effective fire walling, the aforementioned despair and attendant acquiescence (save for some high profilers - Mike Parr & Juan Davila on Woomera) would appear to afflict the (at least privately voiced) desire in the visual arts community for opposition, a submission especially unfortunate given the unique position of art to reflect and process the prevailing concerns of contemporary society. As Eleanor Hartney writes, 'Although it responds to its own history and logic, art is also finely tuned to larger social, political and economic forces. As a result, it becomes a wonderful milieu from which to observe the consequences of emerging ideas and shifts in the cultural landscape.'⁹ More often it becomes a platform for a real-world edit, in unwieldy institutional exhibition models contingent on governmental and corporate financing (and thus obliged to reflect government and corporate interests), well observed by Adam Geczy of the recent Biennale of Sydney '(The World May Be) Fantastic': '...the world is not fantastic, and to say that it could be is like saying that the world could be flat...While a major festival such as Ars Electronica 2002...is subtitled '*Art as the scene of global conflicts*' we in Australia, in the midst of national ethical crises of conservatism, opt for denial. (Isn't it the experience of the last century that specious, escapist art is used as a screen in the times of greatest humanitarian crises?).'¹⁰ Indeed both explanation and some capacity for the oft-invoked notion of agency (beyond the stellar ascent of the individual) might be ingrained in the casual singularity of the role of the artist itself... 'the artist with faith in the relevance of their weirdest thoughts, coming from a tradition that has variously entitled them not to know, not to care, to care to the exclusion of everything else, to know and not to speak, to speak with absolute authority, to act on contingency or to predict the end from the beginning.'¹¹ Could we locate countering strategies to prevailing tendency somewhere in this commitment to contrariety, resisting the dull logic and fixedness engendered by systems of identity marketing and product commodification, and conclude as John Berger did 'that the arranging of artists in a hierarchy of merit is an idle and essentially dilettante process. What matters are the needs which art answers.'¹²

So if the models of practice and initiative prevalent amongst contemporary visual artists (young/emerging & otherwise) can be observed to demonstrate an allegiance to the existing art world, what exactly might this constitute allegiance to? For a neat summary of the defining machinations of the 'art world' as we know it one needn't look much further than the writing and review on contemporary art by our local and national critics in newspapers like The Australian, The Sydney Morning Herald and its sister paper The Age. From one such recent piece, one came to fully appreciate that 'scoring a gallery is the hardest part of making it as an artist...But it is also an essential step if you want to succeed. From here you are on the art world's radar screen, and with regular exhibitions are in a position to join a peer group, get reviewed, have your work bought by collectors and, luck and talent permitting, be picked up for important museum shows.'¹³ And from another, that the exhibition participants were deemed to have 'begun to make inroads into collections and accrue that level of curatorial support essential these days.'¹⁴ Whilst feasibly written with a view to being informative for the benefit of a broad readership,

⁴ Michelle Arrow 'What happened to the voice of dissent?...' SMH 1/7/02.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Letters to the editor SMH 2/7/02.

⁸ John Burnett, Leichhardt July 1, *ibid.*

⁹ Eleanor Heartney *Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads* Cambridge University Press 1997 p.4.

¹⁰ Adam Geczy 'Crypto-realism' *Art Monthly* Australia July 2002 no151 p.24

¹¹ MUF *This Is what we Do: a muf manual* Ellipsis 2001, covernote.

¹² John Berger *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the role of the artist in the USSR* Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1969 p.9.

¹³ Benjamin Genocchio 'Pattern-making by design' *The Australian* 18/5/02.

¹⁴ Benjamin Genocchio 'Twitchy escapist impulses' *The Australian* 4/5/02.

increasingly the negligible space given over for criticism reads more like affirmation. Affirmation of boring, tireless ideas surrounding art and artists (like 'the 24 year old...was suddenly on his way to becoming a famous artist', or 'these sculptures would surely be better off on white plinths'¹⁵), and more disturbingly, affirmation of the hierarchy of power relationships and commercial interests that unflinchingly secure a place for artists at the wrong end of the food chain. On occasion the language broaches florid directive: '*such&such* is going to be one of the great characters of Australian art' ... 'This is an important work of art and should be bought by a public institution.'¹⁶ True, it's hard to keep tabs on the shapeless wash of promotion that frequently passes for art writing around here, but I'd not previously noticed unreserved mythologising and public purse acquisitions policy as falling into the brief¹⁷. More frequently the vaguely trained eye with but a slender grasp of the who's who might learn much of the tangible web of loyalties that bind critics, gallerists and collectors.¹⁸ Of course this is nothing new, and to be fair, nepotism is a persistent amalgam throughout the art scene at large, among artists especially, but in these mass broadcast contexts can be seen to bear influence on the profit of essentially private enterprises. Such relationships might well approach the glaringly obvious, yet the continuing contraction of the print media arena for cultural comment and criticism sends a clear message that editorial generally hold it in no special regard.

Increasingly, the context in which visual art is presented in the press is that of market performance and speculation, with regular "record prices" reports from auction rooms (Tracey Moffat is always BIG news) looking to consume and contaminate the tenuous niche occupied by criticism and review. Combine this with the recent collapse of a number of local/regional visual arts periodicals - Like, Log Illustrated, Post West - the struggle that those remaining appear to experience keeping afloat, and the resulting dearth of paid opportunity for visual arts writers and you have an ideal environment for the flourishing of a noxious magazine like Australian Art Collector. Established in 1997, AAC is essentially a glossy trade-rag that looks to inform and guide simple-minded investors through what must seem like the awfully complicated quagmire of visual culture (contemporary along with historical). Here the name of the game is less thoughtful enquiry and critical debate, more bargain spotting, product definition and artist branding. Integral to this procedure is the contextualising and validation of individuals as practitioners of merit and/or collectability (note the two don't always go hand in hand), which AAC does with gusto, especially for young and emerging artists in regular profiles like 'Priceless' (back page each issue), 'Undiscovered- new artists shooting to the top' and 'Smart Art -for under \$2,000' (ie cause they're cheap). Just like always the printed publication of written analysis or review and image reproduction is a keystone to such identity fabrication and the role of writers is pivotal. What fortune then that AAC manage to regularly mobilise a roster that elsewhere passes as the core of critical writers, editors, critics and professionals in our local cultural tableau - Rex Butler, Edward Colless, Benjamin Genocchio, Bruce James, Joan Kerr, Deborah Clark, Stephen Zagala, Russell Storer, Chris Chapman, Daniel Palmer, Courtney Kidd, Alexie Glass, to name a few. Frankly it's hard to take some of them seriously again in their day jobs when they appear unfazed penning tawdry catchcries like ... 'her stereophotos are like scenes from a designer lifestyle diary: minimalist and yet very sexy'¹⁹, '*such&such* is now not so much an artist to carefully watch, as one to collect'²⁰ or 'His editioned works are an affordable and rewarding

¹⁵ Benjamin Genocchio 'Cunning master of close shave' *The Australian* 20/7/02.

¹⁶ Bruce James 'Mind the banana skin...' *SMH* 8/5/02.

¹⁷ In the same vein, it was hard not to wonder at a recent review by Ben Genocchio of the AGNSW Level 2 project by Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto ('Stockings and spice, everything nice' *The Australian* 16/8/02). Establishing the artist's *oeuvre*, he notes 'Neto first came to Australia in 1997 for a group exhibition of Brazilian artists at the AGNSW'. Great show, remember it well, including the fact that it was curated by Ben Genocchio ('Material/Immaterial: the Guinness Contemporary Art Project' AGNSW march-april 1997). Neglecting to mention that here seems a little odd, but no big deal; the space given over for these reviews is horribly scanty after all. Excepting that Genocchio goes on, discussing the herculean production effort required for the piece at hand, neatly segueing to comment 'well worth the effort as the installation looks set to enter the AGNSW collection, which has negotiated its purchase and is awaiting approval from its board of trustees. This is a coup for the institution as Neto's works are expensive and always pre-sold' and that 'overall it is a shrewd acquisition by curator Tony Bond'. Strange to hear such matters of expenditure discussed in the context of an art review in an influential, nationally distributed broadsheet, remarkably even before a decision has been finalised. Very strange.

¹⁸ The girls at the Herald seem troubled to let a review of anything at Gitta Weise gallery go by without a mention of "passionate enthusiast" Peter Fay...see 'Change of Art' 27/7/02, 'Tradition comes out of its shell...' 24/10/01, 'Recent Masterworks 3/7/02 & 'He's a cardboard kinda cowboy...' 9/7/02. Whilst the guest list in the studio on ABC Radio National's evening arts program Night Club will just as often feature commercial gallerists as artists and producers, with dealers and auctioneers brought in to officiate on such pressing matters as 'What Price Art?' 21/8/02, 'Lawson-Menzies Flynn Auction of Contemporary International Art' 3/7/02, 'Selling Contemporary Art' 6/5/02, 'Art Scholarship and the Art Trade: Who Owns Knowledge?' 17/4/02, 'The Art Market' 20/3/02, all produced Bruce James. See www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/nclub).

¹⁹ Edward Colless 'Smart Art for under \$2,000' *Australian Art Collector* issue 14 oct/dec 2000 p.64.

²⁰ Bruce James 'Cherry Hood: Rebirth of the Real' *Australian Art Collector* issue 20 april/june 2002 p.128.

addition to any private collection.²¹ Here the bottom line is promotion, and so the writing is bound to the pappy fields of description and periodisation (saying what particular trends or already famous/collectable artists the artist at hand might be lumped in with, where they went to college and who with - especially if their mates are already famous/collectable). Simple stuff really, building blocks in the process of commodification, creation of desire and pursuant demand for product, validating cultural worth and thereby asserting market value and the collectability of artwork. Identifying profitable investment, with the primary emphasis being profit for buyers, secondarily dealers, and perhaps even, consequentially, producers. Basically, really fucking dull OR a repellent reduction of both the creative commitment, endeavour and initiative of artists and the skill and knowledge of writers/critics to shrewd market analysis for the connoisseurship of a monied class financially disposed to purchase art. Whilst on one hand this might appear self-explanatory within a stridently capitalist society, on the other such a mutation or co-optation of the role of visual arts writers and critics presents some concern in the broader context of an eroded and battling field of production, exhibition, development, research and publication independent of commercial interests. Likewise it presents poor substitute for vociferous discussion, debate and intelligent dialogue around contemporary art, which together with some measures of open-ness and transparency might one day create inroads for audiences and show that art can have significance for more than just the investor-set. Writers along with artists might feel some responsibility for working somewhere towards such a goal.

Yet depressingly, like much word in print, such low-rent writing as can be found in AAC presents an observable influence on the machinations of the commercial gallery sector, to which the curatorial crew keep a close eye and soon fall in line.²² More than ever you'll read exhibition press along the lines of 'such&such was recently described by *Australian Art Collector* as...' (as the Museum of Contemporary Art did for Patricia Piccinini in its spring 2002 promotional material), in none too subtle demonstration of the seamless, uninterrogated incorporation of something akin to K-Mart catalogue advertorial into the fabric of our supposed critical visual discourse. Again, the unhindered weave of commercial interests (or in the absence of a strong art market, at least the semblance of them) through many aspects of the local contemporary visual art world, together with either the difficulty or disinterest in mobilising counter-positions able to perform competitively for the attention of both audiences and artists, presents a stitched-up situation OR **no alternative**. So, as Hans Haacke identifies... 'the younger people...no longer know a different kind of art world. They assume that this is the natural state of affairs. And so they all become little entrepreneurs.'²³

Such enterprising fancy can be spotted at work in the ever-fluctuating handful of artist-run spaces of the last five years or so in Sydney and Melbourne, and indeed has begun to attract comment... 'Apparently it's been a bit of a thing that ARI's have been like baby dealer galleries: all sleek with eminently purchasable work'²⁴. That artists organisations should find themselves in this position (maybe deliberately, maybe unconsciously) stems from a complex genealogy of overwhelming disinterest in their activity on the part of parallel arts infrastructure (curators, directors, critics etc) and so one can only presume that measures taken to garner professional esteem and visibility have culminated in a standardised model of uncanny superficial likeness to the professionalism, administration and policy of institutional, government funded &/or commercial galleries. This might be identified via the nature of the exhibition program, of the community around the project and by the cultivation of a virtual symbology of authority, exclusivity or professionalism commonly deployed by institutional and commercial galleries (paraphernalia like room sheets, price lists, press releases, dealer acknowledgements, media clippings, cv files, advertising etc). In some instances it is possible to observe quite remarkable levels of compliance, especially regarding financial management (eg accounting, GST collection, commissions, budgets, funding application and acquittal) and occasionally broader state law.²⁵

²¹ Chris Chapman 'Smart Art- for under \$2,000' *Australian Art Collector* issue 22 oct/dec 2002 p.95.

²² Recent Sydney it-boys (how come there's rarely any it-girls?) Shaun Gladwell and David Griggs both enjoyed profiles as 'Undiscovered Artists' in AAC issue 16 april-june 2001, by writers Felicity Fenner and Alexie Glass respectively. Later the same year both artists were picked up by (everybody's favourite) local dealers Boutwell & Draper, and this year both were curated by Charlotte Day into the 200 Gertrude St (Melbourne) Primavera-style national survey show Octopus.

²³ Yve-Alain Bois, Douglas Crimp and Rosalind Krauss 'A Conversation with Hans Haacke' in A.Michelson, R.Krauss, D.Crimp, J.Copjec (eds) *OCTOBER The First Decade, 1976-1986*, MIT Press 1987, p.199

²⁴ Chris Chapman 'Art Round-Up: Sydney, A Personal View' *Art Monthly Australia*, august 2002 no152, p.24...speaking specifically of Sydney ARI's.

²⁵ Visitors to Sydney ARI gallery Wren in February found an obviously compromised contribution to the exhibition 'Equals' by billed participant Trevor Fry, accompanied by the printed notice 'gallery Wren regrets that following legal advice we are unable to play the advertised video work. This is due to the heavy penalties imposed by the NSW

Which is all kind of odd given that the one thing that ARI's tend not to have is money. Yet in a time when many young aspirants (artists/administrators/curators) will volunteer their time to local commercial galleries or institutions (eg Artspace, Asia-Australia Art Centre) in a kind of work experience scenario (purportedly gleaning insight and expertise into the operation of a successful art establishment but realistically relieving them of menial duties like manning the bar, envelope stuffing and running things to the post office), and not forgetting the aforementioned tuition in 'professional practice', then it follows that young &/or emerging practitioners will fixate on these arenas, looking to engage and emulate existing power structures and dynamics in lieu of formulating viable and intellectually competitive initiatives of their own making.

Equally privy to this quandary is the broader dilemma of audiences for the visual arts in a culture as formative as Australia's. Accordingly the imperative of marketing troubles the sector at large and nowhere more keenly than among the aspirants looking to fastrack their way to visibility and recognition. Arguably this notion of artists & ARI's needing to identify broader audiences (as recommended by bodies like the Australia Council and NAVA), to sell themselves, cements these co-imperatives of marketing and professionalism into preoccupation, near annihilating genuine idiosyncrasy and innovation and bearing little relationship to an intelligent development and consolidation of practice (how novel it seems to hear Louise Bourgeois say 'When I did not show, I was protected by being invisible...I had a very long career because people did not bother me'²⁶), or evolving distinct, unique critical positions and identities as networks and spaces. In itself the pursuit of exposure before development engenders no-brain mutations as artists grow to rely on notions of novelty and self-promotion that broach the worlds of advertising and design.²⁷

And so in the absence of too many self-possessed, autonomous entities on the ARI circuit, it is easier than ever before to perpetuate the irritating misnomer that the role of artist-run spaces is that of the perennial 'stepping-stone' on the track to commercial Assumption and success Eternal. Like a bad joke, this stinker has been played out in arts media for who knows how long, but more importantly, energetically refuted by artists and interested professionals for some time now. Yet obviously to many the notion of unassimilated independent endeavour must seem so perfectly alien that they just can't let go of the ball. In September 2000 the Herald ran a decent sized profile on the handful of ARI's operational in Sydney at the time, articulating the general platform of such organisations and talking to a range of their directors and members. Close to half way in we learn that 'Artist-run spaces are often seen as a training ground for them between leaving art school and gaining representation with a commercial gallery or public institution. But not all agree with this idea.'²⁸ Tim Silver, a director of gallery Wren predecessor Rubyayre, rejects this as a "'huge myth that needs to be dispelled. Naturally, an artist-run space doesn't have as much money at its disposal as other spaces, but that doesn't mean that it's a stepping stone on your way to somewhere else. I think artist-run spaces need to start getting respected as having quality work.'²⁹ Cut to June 2002 and an article in the same paper titled 'Art of being cool and getting it out there' profiles the latest round of spaces to receive funding from the Australia Council Young & Emerging Artists Initiative, in which Aaron Seeto (curator at the Asia-Australia Arts Centre, which in certain funding and publicity contexts seeks to be defined as an ARI...see more later) passes

authorities for displaying an unclassified film that has adult content'. Given the consistently explicit nature of Trevor's work it seems more than a little naive for the 'curator' to fail to anticipate this, and likewise raises messy issues over the suppression of proposed projects within a 'user-pays' environment. Both in high contrast to the cautious yet entirely successful and appropriate presentation of Fry's video/installation work at Squatspace in 2001, bang on Broadway no less.

²⁶ Louise Bourgeois 'Interview with Trevor Rots' 10 May 1990, in M-L Bernadac & H-U Obrist (eds) *Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father, Writings and Interviews 1923-1997* MIT Press, 1998 p196.

²⁷ Like the recent CCP (Melbourne) exhibition and magazine project 'Gloss' (july/aug 2002), whose press release announced that it 'begins with the notion of magazine culture...rather than using out-dated models for rethinking and conceptualizing art practice in contemporary culture. Gloss attempts to utilise the ubiquitous and ambiguous umbrella of magazine culture in order to generate discussion, debate and a take-away glossy mag' (www.ccp.org.au). Or Primavera 2002 artist Sarah Ryan, whose works 'both celebrate and expose the slick banality and superficiality of fashion photography and the glossy magazines that inform and influence contemporary youth culture' (MCA press release 24/6/02). Both simulations of the publishing and fashion industries that queerly and conveniently divorce themselves from the resolutely commercial bottom line that motivates such 'cultures'. 'Twas funny to note in one of these tedious magazines (Oyster issue 40 june/july 2002, unpaginated) a hyper-reverent interview with some such fashionslag/art/lifestylemag guru, that posed a question along the lines of 'how does he feel that fashion photography is shaping or informing the parallel world of contemporary art?', to which the point blank reply was 'fashion photography is a job, not art!'. Or as Wayne Tuncliffe puts it, 'while there is a certain democracy in choosing beauty and finish as a visual language, it is of course the same imagery that has left no social or political alternative to consumerism' (catalogue essay 'Bittersweet' published AGNSW 2002 pg 8).

²⁸ Victoria Hynes 'Lofty ambitions of fringe dwellers' *SMH* 11/09/00.

²⁹ *ibid.*

comment that "...artist-run spaces really do play a major role within the art scene... There are a couple of differing views about them. Some people see them as being like a hunting ground for commercial galleries or like a springboard into the commercial world. At the same time they have their own function because there are artists who don't want to show within that context."³⁰ Refer to the Australia Council media release for the same funding round and you'll find the Chair of the Visual Arts/Crafts Board herself characterising artist-run spaces as offering "...increased opportunities for emerging artists to showcase their work. Some artists are immediately picked up by larger galleries and go on to enjoy commercial success. While for others, a responsive and sympathetic environment is necessary for their artistic development."³¹ Sure thing, in an ideal world, but possibly remote from the ground level experience of many artists and again perversely maintaining the 'stepping-stone' thing.

No surprise then that an ABC Radio National piece titled 'Rise and Fall of the Artist-Run Space' in the following month should set the scene with the propositions '...Has the artist-run space become a threatened species? Is the notion of a non-commercial gallery up for grabs? Where will artists turn if these spaces disappear? And what does it all matter, anyway?'³² A little fatalistic, wouldn't you say? Not to mention anti-intellectual. Straight off the mark, in response to the question 'What is an artist-run space?' we were told by a director of one such Sydney gallery that "...an artist-run space is predominantly a place where emerging artists can explore experimental projects, and its probably an intermediary platform where the artist-run gallery can sort of work with established institutions, or before they show work at commercial galleries, it's a place where they could do their work beforehand". To which the interviewer continues "so it's sort of a stepping-stone?", and the director replies "yeah, and often a stepping-stone from college, art college, or just from being a young artist". The interviewer clarifies, "between art college and the rapacious world of the commercial gallery...", from which the director back-pedals somewhat "...but it doesn't always happen that way, a lot of artists choose to always exhibit in artist-run spaces." Lord help us. Such dialogues lend a view to the muddled waters that characterise the identity politics of (certain) artist-initiated organisations.

Whilst artists can't really be seen to have made a serious effort to raise the bar, it is the persistently stunted and patronising tone of popular media, together with a genuine poverty of (critical) attention and resources and a certain *laissez-faire* attitude on the part of big picture funding bodies that has engendered such a crisis of confidence. The 'Night Club' piece continued with questions like 'what are some genuine horror stories about running an artist-run space?', 'what about personality disputes between artists?' and 'is it in the nature of artist-run spaces that they close and then re-open in another form and close again?' *ie* angling for some colour and throwing in yet another ARI stereotype to have gained ground of late. A different gallery director on the panel responds to this last question "Yeah, but that's only because I think everyone gets so pissed off and tired and you know, sick of all the stress...". There is that. Though you couldn't neglect to factor in a host of likely external contributors, among them this unnerving kind of fatalism: 'recent closures...show that artists' cooperatives, like grassfires, can blaze energetically and just as quickly burn out. So is the nature of such galleries inevitably transient?'³³ Back at the time of the closure of inner-city ARI Gallery 19 one might have been struck by a quote from Anna Waldmann of the Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council, in a Herald article titled 'Another CBD 'stepping-stone' goes under', who 'agreed the spaces were an important platform for emerging artists, but said they were always "coming and going". "They are very fluid; that is their nature."³⁴ Whilst both the intrinsic value of ARI fluidity and the free-rein, arms-length approach of most funding bodies can be easily demonstrated, you'd hope this wouldn't necessarily preclude occasional assessment of the efficacy of relationship between the two. And it culminates with something like the final proposition put to the panel of ARI directors on the 'Night Club' program, 'I'm just a little bit worried, that if any of you were to have a gallery that...were to endure, then maybe it would endure by evolving into just another commercial gallery.' What's the story?... **no alternative.**

In any case such simplistic analysis could be easily refuted by a case study like First Draft, Sydney's longest running ARI (est. 1986) that has somehow hung in there without turning into a shop, if anything confirming ARI's frustrations in broadening their concerns and programs beyond simple survival strategy

³⁰ Lenny Ann Low 'Art of being cool and getting it out there' *SMH* 21/6/02.

³¹ National Grants Program Awards Artist-Run Galleries media release 18/6/02, www.ozco.gov.au

³² 'Night Club' Radio National 'Rise and Fall of the Artist-run Space' 17/7/02 presenter: Bill Leak, producer: Bruce James, guests: Jessie Cacchillo(Imperial Slacks), Melody Ellis(Wren), Vicki Papageorgeopoulos(Wren), Elizabeth Pulie(Front Room).

³³ Victoria Hynes 'Lofty Ambitions of fringe dwellers' *SMH* 11/9/00.

³⁴ Nick Leys 'Another CBD 'stepping-stone' goes under'*SMH* 19/6/00.

ie securing ongoing funding, on which they are effectively dependant. On the ground this whole 'rise & fall' issue translates as a threadbare network of support (in more than solely financial terms) that frequently watches healthy, valuable community structures fall apart over typical and tedious real estate and housekeeping matters. And so artists and their organisations are rarely able to achieve a sense of security, let alone positions of self-awareness and criticality of their own recent history (which is why you'll hear massive furrphies like the Nightclub piece). Consistently isolated, entirely factionalised (in Sydney at least), all are overwhelmingly preoccupied with the same daily life dilemmas (leases, rent rises, public liability coverage etc). And virtually all are condemned to go over the same ground by using the same model, as it is adherence to this 'professional' model that forms prerequisite to receiving life-support funding from the Australia Council Young & Emerging Artist Initiative scheme. Such funding is of course unquestionably crucial and will always appeal, lending some security in supplementing running costs, yet likewise presents a bit of a welfare scenario and breeds the misconception that it's nigh on impossible to undertake exhibition projects independently of funding. Artists and their organisations might recognise this and conceive a professionalism beyond conformism, for rigorous programs and agendas that needn't be exclusive of idiosyncrasy, maintaining the core values of a socialised structure for artists, their work and ideas whilst functioning effectively and competitively as recognised peers within a diverse arts environment.

Naturally some initiatives could be said to be doing this already, typically the longer-running ones that have managed to stamp out the grassfires and achieve sustainability ie secured ongoing funding. Funding bodies might consider some means of more pragmatic, ground-up support like gallery/project accommodation schemes utilising govt/state/council properties, or more non-discriminatory 'rent-relief' funding³⁵, as opposed to waiting around to see if an initiative is shaping up as 'professional' (read 'institutional') enough to warrant support (as in the case of OzCo ARI funding, a project must be established one year before eligible to apply). But still the unfortunate fact remains that stereotypical fabrications around ARI's should trickle down and re-emerge from the mouths of the artists themselves, laying a clear imperative for some serious and enthusiastic articulation, assessment and revision of longstanding ideology and identity issues around artist run gallery consciousness, together with a fathoming of thoughtful and meaningful ways to engage & contribute to the communities, culture and society they inhabit.

Somewhere I read one of those newspaper critics go so far as to nominate the future catch-all for current contemporary practice as 'Cullenesque', after local bad-man Adam Cullen.³⁶ Notwithstanding the dubiousness of nominating a single male figure as the summation of an era, if it's gonna be anybodyesque it will be 'Howardesque'. In its taste for vacant old-school symbolism, near total loss on ethics, avoidance of the problematic, pandering to authority and best of all, assimilation of an economically rationalist byline that has artists joining rank and file in locating commercial value as key measure, effecting the spectacular triumph overall of Howard's true people, small business. As the late, totally great Cookie Mueller put it plain... 'What a flimsy way to look at art'³⁷. And that 'in this strange atmosphere, where businessmen are trying to have the eyes of artists and artists are trying to act like businessmen, nobody remains the same.'³⁸ And so the fatal premonitions of the hacks aren't so far from the truth, as artists tracking the ever-elusive kickbacks of practice throw their considerable entrepreneurial *nous* at the given boundaries and models and effect a kind of DIY Frankenstein... the artist-run commercial gallery. Technically this might be exactly what is called for, a forthright gesture of self-determination, exploding the fixed parameters of the sector and directly actualising the environment for practice to which you aspire, responding proactively to the somewhat entrenched standards of ARI culture already outlined. As elaborated by Melbourne artist and gallerist Blair Trethowan (formerly of artist-run gallery TCB) "...TCB closed down due to a lack of a thousand bucks or something, and you know, we had all these people saying to us: "it's a real shame that you have closed down, and stuff, and we were like, well it's not necessarily the way it goes. This is the problem, like everyone would say to us: "well that's just the way it goes", & like, you know it's fine for us, people like us to say that, but this was from people

³⁵ See submissions to this effect (pp.202-206) and suggestion of the Contemporary Visual Arts and Craft Inquiry for 'local government to acknowledge the contribution made by ARI's to the cultural health and vitality of cities and towns and to explore ways to facilitate affordable access to appropriate premises' - Report of the Contemporary Visual Arts and Craft Inquiry, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Commonwealth of Australia 2002 (Chair: Rupert Myer) p.206.

³⁶ Benjamin Genocchio 'Twitchy escapist impulses' *The Australian* 4/5/02.

³⁷ Cookie Mueller 'Art and About' December 1984 (originally published *Details* magazine) in Amy Scholder (ed.) *Ask Dr. Mueller: The Writings of Cookie Mueller* London: Serpent's Tail 1997 p.255.

³⁸ *ibid.* pp.255-256.

who had money, you know, and we just thought “well fuck...if you really thought that it was any good, then give us a thousand bucks!” You know, it’s not just the way it goes, cause with that attitude people just think: “oh well, they come they go”...”³⁹. Interviews are often great documents and this one exposes a multitude of issues common to Australian ARI experience and some of the thinking going on for potential invigoration of the model, as Trethowan continues “... of course there are a lot of benefits about artist-run spaces, like it is great to go and see new shows every two weeks, and to meet new artists and, but then I think to myself, is it worthwhile doing it just like this...you know, forever? I’m pretty sure that there must be another way of doing it that will be of benefit to the artists exhibiting and to the people who are doing the work behind the scenes. And that’s why I thought... well why not a commercial entity?”⁴⁰ I agree that there’s got to be another way of doing it, but can’t quite equate younger artists hunger for commercial representation, for the *je ne sais quois* of the middle-man, with actualising a smarter, free-thinking, self-sufficient yet socially involving ARI sector. Yet in an uneasy all-or-nothing, the transcript goes on ... “ I think that if we had decided that we weren’t going to do a commercial gallery then we would have given up on looking for a space and that would have been the end of it.”⁴¹

And so begat the interesting scenario of TCB/Uplands, a two-headed premises that accommodates the relocated artist-run TCB Inc. together with the commercial dealership of Uplands (managed by former TCB director Trethowan and Jarrod Rawlins). Media comment on the project has been variously benign, curious and affirmative... ‘a combination believed to be unique in Melbourne...the arrangement compels visitors to keep in touch with the work of emerging artists’⁴², ‘An interesting experiment in a new model; everyone in the visual arts will be watching closely’⁴³, and ‘Uplands seems to represent the beginning of a (hopefully) new trend, where artists manage and sell the works of other artists considered commercially unviable by bigger dealerships. As such, it hints at the possibility that edgier practitioners might still make a living from their years of devotion’⁴⁴(note: this ‘make a living’ argument being a frequent but uni-dimensional interpretation of the complex motivation and signification underpinning artists desire for success/exposure). And getting down to business, passing comment on the success of the inaugural fundraising show... ‘there were red spots in evidence too, indicating that Blair Trethowan and Jarrod Rawlins are onto a financially good thing with their gallery.’⁴⁵ Being ‘onto a good thing’ presents a somewhat suitable analogy of the financial arrangement between TCB and Uplands. One writer puts it so ‘...In their minds, Uplands and TCB are independent and yet inseparable; one could not exist without the other. Here, the relationship between the artist-run space and the commercial sector is transparent - TCB subleases from Uplands.’⁴⁶ Responding to the query ‘how do you plan to sustain Uplands...if you found it difficult to sell work?’⁴⁷ Trethowan puts it straighter “...TCB will be renting the space off us, so the artist run space will be paying for it”⁴⁸. Q: “so...in a way, TCB will be funding the commercial component ...it will keep it afloat”... A: “well, it’s not really going to be like that strictly cause we consider that we provide a service to the artists in TCB...but financially yeah, the TCB people will be paying for it”⁴⁹. Without wanting to discount the vital and dynamic roles that galleries like TCB and Uplands play as social and professional networks of support for contemporary practitioners in local contexts, this core arrangement of one artists exhibition costs subsidising another’s according to a predetermined hierarchy of status, merit and other typical art world signifiers might be seen as both exploitative and problematic. Though Trethowan asserts that “we don’t actually see it as the artists paying for Uplands to run...we see it that they are paying for a service for Jarrod and I to run...to look

³⁹ Blair Trethowan, transcript of interview by Bianca Hester published as part of the artwork ‘expanding.compressing.fields.figures(version 3)...texts rendered into various fonts (printed and hand-scribed) and size (ranging from 5pt-430pt in upper and lower case) taken from a series of discussions with...Blair Trethowan ...rendered into printed transcriptions, fragments of narratives, names, titles, concise and vague descriptions, handwritten notes, numbers, images of various formations, incomplete inventories, Letraset transfers and cardboard cut-outs; the bulk of which is edited, compressed and inscribed into a series of mappings, diagrams, lists and A5 sized booklets of various colours...accompanied by a photocopier with which to reproduce aspects of the work...’ 2001 (abridged title), for the exhibition ‘The Blind Spots we sometimes see’ Primavera, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, p.8. Quotations unrepresentative of original text punctuation and construction.

⁴⁰ *ibid* p.9

⁴¹ *ibid* p.9

⁴² Gabriella Coslovich ‘Art emerges in unlikely places’ *The Age* 19/4/02.

⁴³ Daniel Palmer ‘Melbourne artist-run spaces: fighting fit’ *Real Time* no45 2001, www.realtimearts.net/rt45/palmer.html

⁴⁴ Anna Daly ‘Athletes of Leisure’ *Log Illustrated* issue15 2002 www.physicsroom.org.nz/log/archive/15/melbourne.htm

⁴⁵ *ibid*.

⁴⁶ Daniel Palmer, loc.cit.

⁴⁷ Blair Trethowan, interview by Bianca Hester 2001... p.15

⁴⁸ *ibid*.

⁴⁹ *ibid*.

after everything...and to put their work in a better context"⁵⁰. Better than what? one might ask, or why one 'clientele' should be obliged to pay for this service and not the other? To the question... "How do you respond to the notion that some artists might choose not to exhibit with TCB because they are not interested in putting their work in a commercial context?"... "Well I don't really understand why they wouldn't want to..." and that "I would personally find it flattering if I just came out from art school and...the night my show opened at TCB might be the same night that say, a show by *such&such* was opening...I think that this would be amazing."⁵¹ And so the same old politics of power and prestige as played out in commercial and institutional networks are transferred to the supposed alternative represented by artist-run activities, despite all assurances that... "we think TCB is as important as Uplands will be and we don't want it to be, like the second in line...like some commercial spaces have small back rooms or whatever where they kind of 'give artists a go' who aren't represented"... "like Gitte Weise in Sydney"... "yeah, but we don't want it to be like this."⁵²

Funny that Sydney dealer Gitte Weise should rate a mention, because at first glance the TCB/Uplands financial interdependence bears awful resemblance to the ominous Gitte Weise gallery/Room 35 model, whereby a 'user-pays' space augments and arguably subsidises the profile and income of a commercial venture. Established in 1997 in former premises and continued in the current, Room 35 programs largely from proposals, typically exhibiting recent graduates, newly established/emerging artists or out-of-towners for (what was termed in the early days) a 'management fee' of approximately \$2,000 for a one month exhibition in a smallish room downstairs from the gallery proper. This really might as well be named a 'kudos levy' as no one is entirely sure what this 'management' entails or what expenses the fee meets (early on it was said to include professional slide documentation, though that no longer seems to be the case...naturally it would fund invitations, mail out etc, though not necessarily rent...) and essentially Room 35's real value to the many artists who have paid up to show there is its visibility and proximity to the tangible audience and esteem for commercial art and galleries. The self-same proximity Trethowan banks on young artists clamouring for. In any other sector these kinds of set-ups would be called 'nice little earners'. Yet in the frequently preposterous arena of the visual arts they flourish unquestioned as shrewd enterprises plainly capitalising on limited exhibition opportunities and ambitious young artists.

Furthermore, in a totally bizarre perversion of the nomenclature, such ventures can be observed asserting their nature as potentially otherwise to the facts, which is then typically dispersed, affirmed and perpetuated by popular arts media and writers. For example, from the press release of a group show of previous Room 35 exhibitors in the upstairs Gitte Weise gallery (this being the ephemerally dangling carrot, just maybe you could nab a place in the stable)... 'Room 35 is an exhibition space which operates within Gitte Weise Gallery. Founded on the same principle as many artist-run galleries - in that it is a non-profit self-funded exhibition space - Room 35 is a rarity within the commercial gallery circuit.'⁵³ Do note the questionable invocation of the terms 'artist-run', 'non-profit' and possibly 'self-funded'. A Sydney Morning Herald review of the show by Victoria Hynes opened... 'For those wanting to see the more experimental side of contemporary art, artist-run galleries are often the most interesting venues to view fresh work...Managed by Gitte Weise gallery, Room 35 is an independent project space that operates on the same principles as artist-run initiatives.'⁵⁴ A more recent mention of the venue by Herald writer Lenny Ann Low read 'Weise has run her own commercial gallery for ten years which houses Room 35, the "artist-run" space where *such&such* exhibited.'⁵⁵ Suddenly you'd be forgiven for thinking that Room 35 was a non-profit or artist-run space. Especially if you read the gallery profile on the Australia Council website documenting Australian representation at the commercial artfair ARCO 2002... 'In 1997 Gitte Weise inaugurated Room 35, an independent non-profit exhibition space adjacent to the main gallery. The aim of Room 35 is to provide an accessible and challenging environment to support and extend the contemporary arts community by exhibiting and encouraging a diversity of disciplines and fields of art.'⁵⁶ How easy it is to shroud a money-spinner with generic philanthropic artspeak in a climate where nobody (including perhaps the Federal arts body) is too clear or concerned with the current, correct definitions of 'non-profit' (in real world terms, rather than legal-ese tax loopholes), 'independent', 'accessible' and 'artist-run'.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* p.17

⁵¹ *ibid.* p.17

⁵² *ibid.* pp15-16

⁵³ press release 'That was now, this is then' Gitte Weise gallery May 2001.

⁵⁴ Victoria Hynes 'Weird Science' *SMH* 22/6/01.

⁵⁵ Lenny Ann Low 'Change of Art' *SMH* 24/7/02 (her inverted commas, whatever that means).

⁵⁶ ARCO 2002, Australia Council for the Arts www.ozco.gov.au/issues/arco.gitteweise.html

And so in a virtually absurdist comedic inversion, just as some ARI's will cultivate indicators of institutional/public/commercial gallery prestige, the same galleries can in turn be observed colonising the feel good, bureau-recognised rhetoric of artist-run initiatives. As some ARI directors on the panel in the Nightclub that July evening themselves conceived... "Artist-run spaces are just exactly that, they're artist-run. Also...it means that most importantly we don't get paid for what we do, so we're there running the space to be artists and...create a space for artists around us to show, and hopefully at a price that is affordable."⁵⁷ From another... "That's exactly right, it's a space run by artists, for artists to show art in, and that's about it."⁵⁸ A pity that the broader sector isn't characterised by such clarity, as we instead effect a certain suspension of belief that entertains the claims of certain organisations to be 'not-for-profit', 'artist-run' or whatever else they fancy. Taking another local example, the Asia-Australia Arts Centre (formerly & occasionally still known as Gallery 4A) doesn't characterise itself as an artist-run space in it's own promotional material⁵⁹, nor is defined by arts media writers as such⁶⁰, yet within the context of securing funding from the Australia Council Young & Emerging Artists Initiative grants program for artist-run galleries, or participation in the ARI publicity drive 'Artport'⁶¹, does so actively. In the rise to it's current format the Asia-Australia Arts Centre has clearly surpassed its folksy, grassroots DIY origins to become a large organisation that embraces and addresses issues of a broad socio-cultural nature, regularly in collaboration with bodies such as the Sydney City Council and foreign national embassies. This is important work that exceeds both the resources and typically smaller, localised, socialised dynamics of artists, their peers and handful of interested others that tend to characterise artist-run spaces. Indeed what we see in the administration of such an organisation is a tactic of multiple and/or optional identity, one that simultaneously achieves representation at commercial artfair ARCO, reputedly sought membership of the Contemporary Art Organisation collective body CAOS and likewise participates in ARI programs and events such as 'Artport' or 'UseBy'⁶² in Melbourne - capitalising on all on them.⁶³

Feasibly they are able to secure such funding, opportunities and support on the basis of having paid administrative, directorial and curatorial positions, a distinct advantage given that the bulk of genuinely artist-run spaces must manage and administer their projects on top of their members paid employment (especially demanding when it comes to compiling funding applications). An organisation with staff whose paid profession it is to fully dedicate themselves to such matters is obviously at an advantage and in this instance ill-placed to claim the status of artist-run.⁶⁴ That the Asia-Australia Arts Centre's non-artist director is guided and accountable to a committee including artists places it no closer to the reality of being an artist-run initiative than Artspace is, which operates to the same model. In appropriation of both name and nature, the Centre runs according to a 'user-pays' system (with rental discounted somewhat by funding from grants like the ARI scheme) but collects commission on works sold and doesn't pay artist fees. Fodder for the Code of Practice if ever I heard it.⁶⁵ You have to ask whether

⁵⁷ 'Night Club' Radio National 'Rise and Fall of the Artist-run Space' 17/7/02...

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ 'The Asia-Australia Arts Centre is a non-profit organisation that promotes contemporary Asian-Australian artists and exchange between Australia and Asia. The centre holds exhibitions as well as literature, film and video programs.' - Art Directory *Art AsiaPacific* issue 33 2002 p.84, 'Gallery 4A and the Asia-Australia Arts Centre are initiatives of the Asian Australian Artists Association Inc., a non-profit organisation set up to promote living Asian cultures in Australia and to encourage community participation in cross-cultural dialogue within a context of contemporary Australian art' ARCO 2002, Australia Council for the Arts www.ozco.gov.au/issues/arco/gallery4a.html

⁶⁰ 'Gallery 4A, an alternative exhibition space...established in Sydney in 1997...After three years in a cramped space, Gallery 4A moved to a larger, city-owned building in October 2000, at which time it took on a new name -Asia-Australia Arts Centre (with non-profit status)- reflecting its commitment to a wide range of cultural programs encompassing the visual arts, performance, video, film and literature' Gregory Galligan 'Cultural Renovations' *Art AsiaPacific* issue 35 July/aug/sep 2002 p73 & p77.

⁶¹ devised by the Museums and Galleries Foundation of NSW, 2001 & 2002.

⁶² see www.useby.net

⁶³ Even the most half-hearted research shows that the Centre rakes in the grants... up to \$10,000 annually since 1998 from the ARI scheme (limited to 10 grants nationally), additional OzCo funding such as Presentation and Promotion (\$30,000 - 2000/2001 financial year) & Advocacy and Promotion (\$15, 000 -00/01)(see Annual Reports www.ozco.gov.au/resources/publications/corporate/annual/annual6.html), NSW Ministry of the Arts funding (\$55,000 in 2002... \$22, 500 being for curator's salary - see www.arts.nsw.gov.au), as well as 'core foundation funding' through the private sponsorship of James Fairfax, all in a building for which it pays 'nominal rent' - see 'Heritage home for go ahead gallery' *Australian Art Collector* issue 14 oct/dec 2000.

⁶⁴ In saying this it's clear that other spaces also fit this description, notably West Space in Melbourne, that likewise receives funding from multiple levels of government & has paid directorial and curatorial positions, yet has been unwaveringly defined by its commitment to artist-run organisational identity and ethos across its critical exhibition, publishing and education platforms - www.westspace.org.au

⁶⁵ In 2001 NAVA published the Code of Practice for the Australian Visual Arts and Craft Sector, because as Executive Director Tamara Winikoff says 'In an unregulated sector the needs for benchmarks become paramount. They provide the

anybody is asking questions of the mercurial arts of gallery administration and financing these days, or, just as crucially, whether anybody would be listening. More to the point, aside from concluding that 1997 was a pretty inauspicious year, it has been borne out that as long as artists accept such entrepreneurial models (upon whom they are obviously reliant), then unfortunate precedents are set that in a short time become normalised and as we see now, replicated.

An observant, nay pedantic eye on the bigger picture shows that these kinds of identity inversions can be contextualised by a larger, subtle disturbance to the terminology of contemporary art and artists, most notably 'emerging artist' and 'artist-run', which have assumed virtual buzzword status and haphazard application.⁶⁶ Whilst nobody tends to enjoy a semantic argument, surely the international publication of misinformation doesn't help anybody too much, reducing potentially meaningful descriptors to total vagaries such that no one knows exactly what they refer to. Come on guys...know your product! On the other hand it's both laughable and dementing that an otherwise prescriptive, overdetermined and instinctively conservative sector like the visual arts can similarly harbour such slackers with the facts. Relevant to this might be the partial brain-death afflicting contemporary curatorial endeavour. Compare and contrast these two exhibition statements: 1. 'New works by six artists selected not so much by a theme as by a shared tone. Presenting a strange harmony of contrasts, the diverse photographs, paintings and sculptures share an approach that is light, humorous, poetical and unexpected'⁶⁷ 2. '...presents the work of six emerging artists from around the country. While the show doesn't have a theme the works are united by an attitude, reserved, even calculated, tones of understated humour and mock-serious gestures.'⁶⁸ Two separate exhibitions generated in two different countries yet freakishly alike and firmly united in having absolutely nothing to say. Add to this the retro-revival of seriously gender imbalanced group and curated exhibitions and programming⁶⁹ and many elements of the existing art world are looking more than a little untenable. Such things never seem so much deliberate as demonstrative of a pervasive quality of thoughtlessness that characterises aspects of local contemporary visual culture at the present time.

Another title to this tirade might well have been 'when did art ever change the world, anyway?', on account of the number of times I've made note of the rhetorical question in the air of late.⁷⁰ So what alternative could there be to **no alternative**? Really it is only to be expected that artist-driven culture be regarded as stepping-stone culture so long as artists treat it as such, in terms of what you get out of it rather than what you can put into it. Melbourne artist Robert Hollingworth writes... 'It is worth remembering that all of the important movements in art that have deviated from the established frameworks of what art should be and how it should be presented, have been driven by artists themselves. The big changes in the broader perceptions of what contemporary art is and can be, have not been initiated by patrons or arts professionals, but by groups of artists working co-operatively towards common goals.'⁷¹ Possibly 'co-operatively' sounds like a big step in this fractured little town, in a country of far-flung cloistered capital cities. But the sentiment is there. Likewise it is in the writing of sociologist Alain Touraine, who effectively rephrases the minimiser's query 'when did art ever change

standard which ethical people working in various roles in the sector have agreed is fair and reasonable...Otherwise it's anyone's guess what is OK and what represents malpractice and exploitation' 'If Pigs Could Fly: The Ideal Gallery' *Artlink* vol 22 no 3 Art & Enterprise 2002 p.58. Yet the efficiency of such a Code is debateable, as Joanna Meldelsohn counters, 'The impact that the NAVA document is likely to have on actual practice is signalled by the word 'should' which appears in almost every paragraph when describing good practice: 'should be used', 'should consult', 'should supply', 'should send'. 'Should' is simply an expression of pious hope. It has no force.' (ibid. p56).

⁶⁶ eg '...emerging artists such as Emil Goh, Stephen Birch, Tony Schwensen, Brent Grayburn and David Haines...' Bruce James 'Even Paradise has its problems' *SMH* 6/2/02...all but possibly one of whom have clearly exceeded the first five years of practice and are fairly respectably established (not too many emerging artists make the grade for the Biennale),⁷⁰ To clarify: it is common that artists run non-profit spaces, that may or may not receive government body funding, like 200 Gertrude St, CCP, Westspace, First Floor, RMIT Storey Hall and Swinburne.' Anna Daly 'Athletes of Leisure' *Log Illustrated* no15, www.physicsroom.org.nz/log/archive/15/melbourne.html... hello? two of these are artist-run, '...200 Gertrude St (Melbourne's most renowned artist-run gallery, studio complex and all round art incubator)...' Andrew McKenzie *Contemporary* feb 2002 p.79.

⁶⁷ 'Into the Blue' Monash University Museum of Art june 2002 www.monash.edu.au/muma

⁶⁸ 'Honestly/New Artists 2002' Artspace, Auckland july 2002 www.artspace.org.nz

⁶⁹ eg 'Objection' Physics Room (nov 01)+ Sarah Cottier gallery (mar 02) curated by Tim Silver & Russell Storer : 8 artists /2 women, 'Desk Job'Mori gallery (june 02) curated by Fiona Lowry, Marc Dempsey, Julie Fragar, Piers Greville, Tim Douglas: 21 artists/6 women, 'Bittersweet' AGNSW (may 02) curated by Wayne Tunicliffe : 7 artists/2 women, 'Problems in Paradise' Scott Donovan gallery (jan 02) : 5 artists/0 women, Vasily Kaliman gallery, established Sydney 01, fixed stable comprises : 11 artists/1 woman.

⁷⁰ Most notably by curator Linda Michael on the ACAM email discussion listserv (june 2002), which only makes sense given that most arts professionals would have a vested interest in art **not** changing their worlds...

⁷¹ Robert Hollingworth 'Minding Your Own Business - Part A' (Mass Gallery) in *Space Traffic: artist-run spaces beyond a local context* published West Space Inc. (Melbourne) and Para/Site Art Space (Hong Kong) 2002, p.45.

the world, anyway?' as 'Is our society still capable of using its ideas, hopes and conflicts to act upon itself? Attempts are being made on all sides to convince us that this question has to be answered in the negative.'⁷² Writing in 'Beyond Neoliberalism' as to how both the thinkers of the left and economic forces of the right together posit certain powerlessness in the face of globalization, Touraine asserts that 'neither believes in the existence of autonomous social actors who are capable of influencing political decision-making. This pessimism produces as a reaction an almost fundamentalist defence of institutions.'⁷³ To my mind this thinking sits comfortably with the workings of institutional hierarchy and protocol in the micro-society within society of the cultural arts. With high faith in individual instrumentality Touraine suggests 'we have to replace a logic of order and disorder with a logic of social and political action and demonstrate that, rather than having to choose between a purely defensive institutional realm and purely anti-establishment rebellions, we have to recognise and revitalize a public space that can encompass both social conflicts and the will to integrate.'⁷⁴ This might be cultivated quite organically in local artist communities by actualising some much needed discussion around the here & now...speaking, writing, debating, info sharing, agreeing, disagreeing, whatever, ideally in a format that sits somewhere more fruitfully between institutionally conceived occasions and idle opening gossip.

It was interesting to note an article in the artmag *Artlink* on the visit of artist and critic Matthew Collings to Australia (because in keeping with our trenchant cultural-tinge, Australians typically need a foreigner to tell them how it is, even better if their English...), orchestrated largely by artist Mary Lou Pavlovic, who '...is interested in the speaking positions taken by, or accorded to artists here...'⁷⁵ Exactly this idea of a 'speaking position' might be conflated with that of the 'autonomous social actor' to reconceive, even informally or 'unofficially' a more mindful environment for practice. As Touraine elaborates, 'a mode of critique...opposed to all those representations that deny the possibility of positive action. On the contrary, it asserts that new actors are appearing and that they are demanding rights and identities. It also holds that the demand for cultural rights is now the factor that will allow new actors to appear and that this is the one demand that can restore a capacity for action...'⁷⁶ To many this would evoke an essentially redundant or disproven ecology, though in some measure could strengthen the foundation of a more meaningful platform, together with an expanded roster of 'speaking voices' to shape and influence existing dynamics. Writing is an ideal medium in this respect, and as most artists are skilled by virtue of the 'professional' dimension of practice, they would do well to apply it more widely and creatively expand the dull fraternity of (largely male) writers who deliver the voice of commentary and opinion on visual art (seen in germ form in Sydney recently with cool publishing initiatives like 'Haiku Review' and 'Lives of the Artists'). Importantly these measures might necessitate an urgency of temperament so as to elide the typically assimilationist tendency of an existing local strain of false gesture practice that superficially positions itself as unorthodox or 'outside', yet is so essentially enmeshed, enraptured and dependent on the signification of the self-same institutions they are purportedly 'outside' of.

Allan Kaprow, an artist who actively engages his 'speaking voice' as a great essayist, pondered this exact conundrum ('At all times, however, they have informed the art establishments of their activities, to set into motion the uncertainties without which their acts would have no meaning'⁷⁷) and many of the aforementioned problems in his 1971 essay 'The Education of the Un-Artist, Part I'. Tracking the genealogy of discernible inclinations in '70's practice he terms 'non-art', 'anti-art' and 'ART-art' and their respective relationship to authority frameworks, he posits 'As a human goal and as an idea, ART is dying. Not just because it operates within conventions that have ceased to be fertile. It is dying because it has preserved its conventions and created a growing weariness toward them...'⁷⁸ Speaking clearly of its time but also arguably of the present, he proposes that ...

'Artists cannot profitably worship what is moribund; nor can they alternatively war against such bowing and scraping when only moments later they enshrine their destructions and acts

⁷² Alain Touraine *Beyond Neoliberalism* London: Polity Press 2001, p.1.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ *ibid.* pp2-3.

⁷⁵ Samantha Semmens 'Matthew Collings comes to town' *Artlink* Art & Enterprise vol 22 no3 2002 p. 9.

⁷⁶ Alain Touraine, *op.cit.* p.5.

⁷⁷ Allan Kaprow 'The Education of the Un-Artist, Part I' *Art News*, February 1971 p.28, cited in Martha Rosler 'The Birth and Death of the Viewer: On the Public Function of Art' in Hal Foster (ed.) *Discussions in Contemporary Culture:1* DIA Art Foundation, Bay Press 1987 p.9.

⁷⁸ *ibid* p.29.

as cult objects in the same institutions they were bent on destroying. This is a patent sham. A plain case of management takeover. But if artists are reminded that nobody but themselves gives a damn about this...then the entropy of the whole scene may begin to appear very funny. Seeing the situation as low comedy is a way out of the bind. I would propose that the first practical step toward laughter is to *un-art* ourselves, avoid all esthetic roles, give up all references to being artists of any kind whatever.⁷⁹

In this some would be reminded of Vito Acconci's remarks in question time after his MCA feature lecture for this year's Biennale, that he has his doubts over the idea of art as a 'career' (including his own...this to a twitchy audience of many participating Biennale artists, career artists *par excellence*) and that he preferred the notion of art as a 'verb', an application unlimited by a singular context or specialisation. As does Kaprow... 'when art is only one of the several possible functions a situation may have, it loses its privileged status and becomes, so to speak, a lower-case attribute.'⁸⁰ And he concludes, as we might as well (albeit from an entirely more complicated, informed yet perplexing perspective) with the advice...

'Artists of the world, drop out! You have nothing to lose but your professions!'⁸¹

lisa kelly
september 2002.

⁷⁹ *ibid.* p30.

⁸⁰ *ibid.* p66.

⁸¹ *ibid.* p68.