

What Images Return

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Every so often a T-shirt will float out of a crowd. It is one T-shirt in particular. It bobs towards me or slips out of view as suddenly as it appeared. It is blazoned in black and white with the image of a pile of human skulls. For me, the skulls are not so much a reminder of mortality or a herald of the holocaust to come. They are an ambassador from times past, coming and going like a twinge of bad conscience.

Years ago I would see rows of identical T-shirts, freshly silkscreened and drying on hangers in a corner of Art Unit. Robert McDonald would be hovering somewhere nearby with black ink on his arms. The sale of T-shirts helped to keep the doors of Art Unit open to the public, or they kept Robert McDonald, Juilee Pryor and their baby, Alexander, fed and housed. There wasn't much of a distinction to be made here, for Rob and Juilee were Art Unit. A pair of adjoining, semi-derelict workshops in Alexandria had been knocked into one, transformed by Rob and Juilee's energy and by an extraordinary moral passion they showed. Art Unit was their vision of an alternative art centre.

Yuppies didn't have a name then, but their precursors hadn't yet discovered Alexandria. It was a recently de-industrialised area, grimly ugly limbo shot through and through by thundering trucks on their way to and from St. Peters tip. Upwardly mobile artists, art collectors and gallery-goers hadn't discovered Alexandria either. It was as fringe as fringe could be.

The two buildings in Henderson Road sheltered a strange environment with a strange atmosphere, run by strange people in a strange time. This, at, least, is the impression of hindsight. Almost nothing in my subsequent experience corresponds to what Art Unit was, how its exhibitions looked or what it stood for. Rob and Juilee were, likewise, one-of-a-kind people. No doubt the rise and fall of their larrikin art centre will be explained according to the fashion-riddled periodising which regulates the art world's sense of history. Was Art Unit then, a last outpost of the "seventies" killed off by the alien climate of the "eighties"?

That's not a question I'd choose to answer, at least in the terms it is framed. I am certain Art Unit could have survived physically, with its ideals intact, and a throng of participants and spectators continuing their support of exhibitions and events. Yet it couldn't have survived without Rob and Juilee, who were extraordinary catalysts as well as intensely principled people. They were committed to two ideals which didn't spring up in 1968, nor did they lose their relevance in 1985. They believed art was a radical activity, for example:

1. Artists/works of art can create their own audience.
2. Art can determine, or strongly influence its psychological and physical context (rather than vice-a-versa).
3. Freedom is relative, but better to push beyond the limits of unfreedom than to work within the constraints of professional and commercial expediency.
4. Contemporary art cannot allow itself to be taken hostage by museums and commercial galleries. Artists should retain control over the company their work keeps,

should have control over the effects and meanings it creates, and should remain independent of institutional criteria of "good" and "bad", "professional" and "unprofessional", "new" and "passe", etc.

5. The hushed, pristine white cubes which have become a universal stereotype for art galleries are not as neutral as they seem.

Art Unit was anything but neutral. The walls were white, but a losing battle was waged against stains and blistering damp. Where else could you see, for example, two Aboriginal kids off the street, still on their bicycles, dawdling in the middle of an exhibition? They were made to feel welcome, to come and go as they pleased, on foot or on wheels. They were not rebuffed or intimidated by neutrality, in other words.

There was once an exhibition at Art Unit called "Total Fat : A Food Slutz Expose" by someone called 'Wart'. I think she lived in the neighbourhood. She was obviously not an art school product nor a habitue of the art scene. The theme of the exhibition was that fat was a feminist issue. It was the worst looking exhibition that I had seen at Art Unit, but possibly also the most personally courageous one. I have a clear memory of WART's work to this day, while a lot of credibly "good" art has proven eminently forgettable. (*During Anzart in Hobart in 1984, Wart ran Art Unit for 3 weeks and on our return we found that she had taken over and renamed it Wart Unit- Robert.*)

Cleanliness, elegant presentation, professional management, and the omnivorous market's passion for small paintings all dominate today's alternative spaces. These usually differ from what they are supposed to be alternative to, only insofar as they are a little younger and more down-market. Pecking orders in the art world are so well entrenched nowadays it seems almost beyond the bounds of possibility that an artist of Adrian Hall's calibre could appear in a show with students. However, Adrian remains unique among his peers, since the fear of contamination or the idea of 'slumming' wouldn't even cross his mind. He was an enthusiastic supporter of Art Unit and was delighted to exhibit there among students. What other images return from the days of Art Unit? The first installation I ever saw by Simone Mangos - a salt pillar with a pool of water lined with black plastic. Jelle van den Berg's first show in Sydney; first encounters with the work of Debra Dawes, Kristine Rose, Terry Burrows, Derek Kreckler, Paul Hewson's photo-narratives. A remarkable grand-slam of a closing exhibition by Nahum Szumer (whatever happened to him; why was he never "taken-up"?). It was a large, mixed media installation and the elements had all come from abandoned industrial sites in Alexandria, radiating an atmosphere of gritty pessimism throughout the gallery.

"You wouldn't see a show like this in any other gallery", Rob said proudly as I left Szumer's exhibition. He was right. Art Unit closed its doors a few days later and I wrote a valedictory article for the Sydney Morning Herald, recounting the problems Rob and Juilee had had in raising public funding. A similar article 6 months earlier had appeared and Gisela Scheinberg, the director of the Holdsworth Galleries in Woollahra made an amazing offer to lift them out of their immediate debt so that Art Unit may continue. A gracious offer that was to allow 2 of the most important pieces produced at Art Unit to take place. Nahum Szumer's final exhibition and the Grotesque Monkey Choirs performance piece 'Ice Carving in Mexico'. But now as Art Unit closed its doors for the final time, there was no offer, no bailing out, only silence from the funding bodies. Rob and Juilee decided on principle to defy the Australia Council and expose the limits of tolerance inherent in its funding policy.

Their gesture was intended, and has been remembered, as exemplary. In effect Art Unit became the exception that proves the rule.

October 1988.

**(From: Final Verse: Art Unit 82-85: published by Art Unit, Robert McDonald/
Juilee Prior 1988)**