

THE ARTISTS UNION

'If you keep having meetings, and the meetings are taken up with tedious details of putting together an organisation, and a hundred or more people still keep coming, then something pretty unusual is going on!'

This comment seems to sum up the mood of many Sydney artists involved in the movement to organise a national artists' union. The mood is positive and quite determined. (The image of artists as people more adept at organising their own private space than at organising themselves may yet stand in need of correction.)

Of course there is nothing very new about artists organising. They rarely do so for the pure joy of it, but usually because circumstances have made it necessary. In a number of other countries, artists' unions exist with a substantial track record, e.g. in Holland, Germany, UK, Sweden, Yugoslavia, etc. In Canada, where the situation is similar to Australia, an effective union, CARFAC (Canadian Artists Representation / Le Front des Artistes Canadiens), has operated for over ten years.

In Australia, the problem has been that despite a long history of association among artists, no broad based representative organisation has survived it.

The movement towards such an organisation began to pick up momentum earlier this year. While as yet it has no legal status as a union, it is evidently a long way past the fantasy stage. Artists are busily associating because they happen to believe that some form of representative organisation is a necessity. One of the artists commented that: *organisations such as C.A.S. performed a function in the past with their ideological commitment to 'up-to-date-date' art. They pushed a notion of avant-garde internationalism which corresponded with the post-war boom years. But those days are over. The problems are now more fundamental than commitment to any particular kind of art can deal with...*

The union seems to have emerged out of dissatisfaction with many things: the material problems that artists here in Australia face, the way 'Culture' is administered, the way art is taught, the kind of art that is supported, reported, imported, exported or deported, the lack of communication, the bad circulation of information, and many other things, (For many it seems to be simply a question of survival as an artist.) Clearly it is not going to be a club for artists dedicated to one style or medium. Or, in the words of one of the artists

*'No more brothers of the brush to the exclusion of sisters, or non-brushers
Ideology is important. So are the differences in practise. The artists union should provide a framework in which all of these can be debated. But we cannot afford to be distracted by art-political sectarianism. First of all we need an organisation which is democratic and representative, which cannot be dominated by any particular interest group. That means unity on a consensus basis, and that's not impossible. I don't want to imply that politics are off-limit. Organisations such as Artists' Action which supported Labor after the coup in '75 did a good job. But once the immediacy of the issue faded, the organisation collapsed. Organisation around single issues is very*

important. But spontaneous bursts of commitment tend to be followed by apathy and once the issue is no longer hot, there seems no reason to continue.

What seems to be necessary then is the organisational framework for continuity, as well as unity. And I think you can probably get both by responding to the everyday needs and interests of artists, by providing a flexible framework that people can use, rather than by putting ideology up front. If you want a broad-based organisation with the power to change anything, then you also need to be quite materialistic and many potential members will simply be asking: 'what's in it for me?'

But before the union can deal positively with such a legitimate accumulation of self-interest, it will need to analyse the present state of the art industry, with a view to formulating on-going priorities. This is no easy matter.

The situation in Australia is complex, but there have been some clear tendencies. During the last fifteen years or so, 'high culture' has been a growth industry. The boom in the private market was reinforced by a dramatic increase in State support for the arts under the Labor Government. Art became a glamour business on the one hand and an institutionalised framework for self-styled artocrats on the other. Except for a few exceptions or deviations (such as the Community Arts, Ethnic Arts, and Aboriginal Arts programs) the two went hand-in-hand very nicely.

Moreover, the post-war expansion in art education was producing results, releasing a multitude of young artists into an oversaturated market-place, or recycling them as art teachers.

Now that the booms are behind us, expansion has been arrested in recession, and State patronage cut back, it has become a time to reflect. Perhaps a little late in this process, it is now becoming apparent to many people that the lot of the working artist really hasn't changed much at all.

Much of the Government money ear-marked for the arts seems to have been used to expand and consolidate the various art administrations, and to finance their less-than-explicit concepts of 'culture', much of which is imported rather than fostered locally. The Visual Arts Board, despite the good intentions of some of those involved, continues to grow more remote, out of touch and fixed in its idiosyncracies. The Art Gallery Directors Council, the latest of the big spenders, functions with even less public accountability than the Board of Directors of B.H.P. The values which inform most of the decisions of these art bosses seem linked to concepts like 'spectacle', 'prestige' and how much it costs. In other words, they like art which reflects money, power, newsworthiness and social status. But where does that leave the artist?

Obviously one of the preliminary strategies for the artists' union would be to demand public accountability from such administrative bodies, as well as democratic representation on the various boards and decision-making committees.

Many of these somewhat general gripes were given a specific focus by the recent Sydney Biennale. The problems with that event are probably well-known by now. Recommendations from the artists' community about the organisation of the Biennale were high-handedly ignored and artists were rail-roaded by one bureaucratic tactic

after another. Significantly, one major concession was forced from the Biennale Committee: the equal representation of women in the Australia section. (All this is well documented in the 42-page booklet **SYDNEY BIENNALE; WHITE ELEPHANT OR RED HERRING?** This booklet published to coincide with the opening of the Biennale, set out to record the process of negotiations about the Biennale **from the viewpoint of the artists' community** and was generously funded by the Alexander Mackie Student Representative Council after being denied funding by the Visual Arts Board.)

Meetings to discuss the Biennale had been going on within the art community since the previous Biennale, three years earlier. However, shortly after the opening of the Biennale, a public meeting was called for artists to discuss the question of an artists' organisation. This was attended by about a hundred people and the need for a strong organisation was voiced by most people present. Many artists seemed fed up with being told what art is good for them and having no voice in what happens. At this initial meeting, artists present from other States agreed with the need for a national organisation and were prepared to organise meetings in their home states. Since then meetings have begun to be held and positive steps have been taken towards an organisation in every state.

The stages of development are different in each State. Sydney took the first initiative and so discussions and work are furthest advanced there, where four large public meetings have already occurred. In July of this year, Sydney published the first issue of a national Newsletter. Responsibility for publishing the Newsletter is being rotated among the States: Melbourne published an expanded second issue at the end of September.

There has been a lot of discussion about the structure and aims of the union at the public meetings. In general, the union sets out to represent the interests of anyone who is involved in any form of production in any field of art or craft. (As a mass organisation of artists, it has an important function to develop links with Aboriginal, ethnic and community artists and their work.) It will provide regular communication in all fields of art. It will work for a more democratic participation of artists in all institutional and governmental decision-making which affects artists, for more democratic access to resources and skills. It will represent artists on legal etc. matters, (contracts, copyright issues), will establish guidelines for exhibition conditions, will examine the problems of unemployed and underemployment among artists and cultural workers, and foster links between artists and cultural workers and other workers in the community. Another important aim is to actively counter both sexism and racism in all areas of art.

With such aims, the structure of the union will need to be exemplary. We can only report on how this issue is being tackled in Sydney. The major concern there, is to set up a structure which from the outset **guarantees** a democratic representation of all kinds of artists and excludes any possibility of sectional interests gaining a controlling representation. A number of different forms have been debated at length. The structure presently under consideration is one which asks members to declare their main area of interest. This is being related to the main forms of **distribution** (either anticipated or actual) of work or ideas: e.g. through galleries, through non-art venues

or directly to non-art communities, within an art or related institution, or other forms. Thus each Steering Committee would be dominated by an equal number of representatives of each of these interests. While this has the initial appearance of being unwieldy, it does seem one of the best ways to guarantee a continuing democratic structure.

In Sydney, four working groups have been set up. One is busy working on the formulation of a constitution, which when ratified by a general meeting will establish the Sydney group as an 'unincorporated association', which is only the first stage in the process of becoming affiliated as a union. Another working group has been compiling a brief, for a research project to study the general conditions under which artists work in Australia, and their needs and expectations in respect to the artists' union. It seems there is very little concrete information available about the actual working conditions of artists. A rough draft of the research brief is being published in the second issue of the Newsletter for comment, amendment and criticism. Another group is studying the question of moral rights for artists with the initial aim of presenting a paper at the Seminar on this topic being organised by the V.A.B. in November of this year. A fourth group is involved in researching questions about art education at all levels, the conditions under which artists are employed, the rights of students, and related issues.

The decision to aim for affiliation as a union is complex and can only be dealt with briefly here. On an economic level, the bargaining strength of any artists' union is necessarily limited. The arts do not occupy a strategic importance in economic life. Artists are usually not bound within the employer-employee relationship, as, for example, actors are within the theatre. For a self-employed artist, the right to strike is obviously vacuous rhetoric. (An Art Strike was organised in New York in May 1970: its effect, if any, was achieved through actions which carried the pressure of embarrassment, e.g. by picket lines in front of the Museum of Modern Art.)

As far as art teachers and students are concerned liaisons with the Teachers' Federation and A.U.S. are obviously important. Apart from legal guarantees, it is also affiliation with the federated trade union movement that would substantially contribute to the strength of any potential artists' union.

However, lacking economic clout, the union would ultimately rely on its public credibility to lobby, apply political pressure and campaign effectively through the media. That credibility is dependent on the ability to articulate demands and formulate policies, not a peripheral pressure group but as an organisation which is seen to represent art producers in Australia.

It is also for this reason (as well as the strong desire for independence) that most participants are presently not in favour of applying for State funds to set up the organisation, nor on becoming dependent on such grants, as is the case in many other countries, e.g. Canada and Holland. Other sources of funding will need to be developed, and of particular importance will be Membership fees.

But what sort of program is being talked about, since it is this which will attract membership, or not?

Again most of the information we could get is about the Sydney group, who are in the process of planning for the next year. However discussions are at a very early stage, so the following report of some of the ideas being explored is perhaps premature.

An important item on their program is a national conference which they would like to see happen by the middle of next year. This is necessary so that co-ordination between the various state organisations can be extended and programs mutually developed. At this time it is planned that discussion be initiated about the kind of structure desired on a national level, plus various priorities developed for a national program.

Another priority is the need for a permanent office space for the union. This has been voiced many times. Attempts will also be made to establish a permanent meeting place and exhibition space.

A series of public discussions or forums has been proposed for 1980. The hope behind this is to generate more informed discussion among artists on a range of issues confronting artists in Australia. Currently discussion of any kind barely exists on a public level. If these forums are planned along related themes, a sense of continuing and evolving discussion could possibly emerge within the art community.

The national newsletter will be continued and, it is hoped, expanded to include listings of relevant events and exhibitions. A series of pamphlets is also being talked about which would focus on particular topics, e.g., the issues of copyright, taxation information for artists, as well as on more general topics of debate. There has been some discussion on the form that exhibitions should take. One idea, tentatively raised in Sydney is for a state exhibition drawn from regionally-based open exhibition, (Sydney being just one such region.) The suggestion is that through a democratic selection process at the regional level, a number of works could be drawn to represent each region. i.e., representing the full range of work being produced in each region. Such ideas are worth developing since they contain some very important principles, holding the seeds of a decentralizing view of art production, as well as a 'grass roots' control over what is to represent a particular region, a state, and even the country.

This is a sample of the ideas being examined and is perhaps enough to give an indication of the kind of program being planned.

As will be evident from this, a quite massive task is ahead of artists if they are going to build an organisation with the aims and capacity outlined above. But in the long term it seems to be the only solution in defending what is now a very vulnerable minority. If, as an artist you don't organise, you simply have to accept that others (i.e., dealers, curators, directors, administrators etc.) will continue to organise you in their interests.

Artists Union Steering Committee

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