

Side F/X

[*Art Network*, Vol 1 No 1], p22, Nov 1979

At the end of 1977 the Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education vacated their Liverpool Street campus, which for two years housed the offices of the School of Art, studios for lithography, fabric printing, painting and sculpture.

Around the same time, several individuals — some friends, some yet to meet — sensed a personal need to experiment with their living space and style. When these people eventually came together the group consisted of several musicians forming a band (The Works), a drama student, a pottery student, an architecture student, two art students, an independent video worker, a sculptor and theatre designer and a four-year-old child.

We came together as much out of the atmosphere as of the facility created by the vacant space. We later shared with the other two sympathetically occupied buildings on the site, a very large, tree-filled yard — something of an oasis in Sydney's inner-city area. It was a stimulating, although hardly luxurious, atmosphere to live in.

The site was, for some 10 years previous, left vacant by the Marist Brothers who, according to our information, had the premises as a primary and secondary school for approximately 100 years prior to that.

It is the first Marist Bros. School in Australia and consists of a complex of three structures built between the 1850's and 1910 which now have National Trust classification.

In August of 1978 I began negotiations with I.A.C. (now Citicorp) to obtain a lease on the property. These culminated in a lease being drawn up for our rental of the main school building at \$1,000 per calendar month, and we began occupancy on October 1st.

I was advised by a Citicorp executive not to sign the lease until our Development Application for a change in use of the premises had been approved by the City Council.

Several months later we were told by Citicorp that we had gained Development Approval for an Arts and Crafts School.

It is difficult, in retrospect, to say just what our motives and expectations were when entering this kind of space. A few of us had been initial inhabitants of a large old warehouse in East Sydney some 18 months before and I suppose, hoped to enlarge on some of the possibilities discovered and confidence gained through that experiment.

Because of dealings such as the Development Application to the Council, the lease etc. we realised the necessity of collective representation and more importantly, collective contribution and responsibility sharing. We adopted the name, East City Group (E.C.G.), feeling it sufficiently open in definition of activity, yet placing us within a particular area — the eastern inner-city. The E.C.G. could remain diverse, spontaneous and relatively anonymous.

In a letter dated October 27, 1978, the E.C.G. printed and circulated a letter addressed "... to the community as a whole ... and to people with an interest in the arts." In this letter we introduced ourselves as "... a collective of individuals working within, what could loosely be defined, arts and crafts — although we expect our activities will focus in other areas." We stated that "... our aim is to evolve with and in the community, a place for creative

experimentation and an access, resource and information centre ...” In the letter we further described the area, made proposals for tutorials/workshops and a general invitation to drop by to talk to us and have a look around.

The release of this introductory letter coincided with a presentation of Media Action Group’s ‘Duckology’ — an analysis of American Imperialism through Disney comics — and the following day, a community fete comprising jumble and food stalls, Bar BBQ. and entertainment.

The following months saw a variety of activities improving the quality of E.C.G.’s domestic situation and establishing communication with the local and arts communities previously unknown to us.

Side F/X, as the Old Marist School came to be named, by offering access to local individuals and groups, began to develop a broad relationship between the arts and the community — through activities as diverse as the presentation of performance works derived from both art and theatre, and through exhibitions of art, films and public meetings.

The following is a resume of some events seen at Side F/X:

- “The Money Show” — starring Fifi L’Amour
- New Year’s Day community barbecue and party
- Exhibition of photographs, soft sculptures, drawings, paintings, documentation, audio, video and mixed media installations by the E.C.G.
- Six evenings of Performance Side F/X by friends of the E.C.G.
- A mixed Invitational exhibition by local artists.
- Several gigs by the Works, X.L. Capris and Popular Mechanics.
- “Olive Exhibition” — a studio installation by Mark Koludrovic, opened by a practical-joke-come-performance by other E.C.G. members.
- “Media-Rite” — an installation at the Sculpture Centre by the East City Group.
- “CAO WAO” — an installation and performance by Richard Maude.
- Several seasons by Cabaret Conspiracy.
- “Contemporary Improvisation” — featuring Jon Rose, Louis Burdett, Dave Ellis and Rick Rue.
- “Burlesco” — several seasons presented by Sideshow, directed by Michael Matou with an all star cast including Simon Reptile.
- Various screenings such as “Devo”, “Woolloomooloo” and student productions.
- “The Young and the Jobless” — cast from the ranks of the unemployed in association with the Australian Performing Group, Melbourne.
- “Shift” — an Outskirts production about a woman coming to terms with her lesbianism.

- “Carnage”, “Political Transmission”, and “A Razor Turn” — films presented by Nightshift with Tim Burns.
- “Rags” — a studio installation and performance by Deidre Dowman.
- Public meetings to discuss an artists’ union.
- Benefit performances of music and poetry for ‘THROAT — A MEUSE ANTHOLOGY’ — a magazine by Les Wicks, Geoff Aldridge and Grant Caldwell with guest readings by N.Z. poets Sam Hunt and Gary McCormick.
- “Not Space Music” — live electronics by Warren Burt, Greg Schiemter and Carl Vine.
- “That ... THING in the oven ...” — a documentation and installation around a domestic theme by Richard Maude with the E.C.G.

Apart from those already mentioned, Side F/X has provided free working and rehearsal space for groups otherwise deprived of adequate facilities.

These include: “The Intimate Theatre Co.”, “The Astounding Optimismo Show” written by Tim Gooding and Directed by Jean Pierre Mignon; two plays “La Lecon” and “Huit Clos”, directed by Igor Persan and presented by the Dept. of French Studies, Sydney University. Cabaret Conspiracy also initiated workshops at F/X and Sideshow have presented movement and mime classes.

SYDNEY BIENNALE

Through a mutual friend, Terry Reid, the E.C.G. has been corresponding with Ian Hunter, Acting Director of the National Art Gallery of New Zealand and James Mack, advisory officer for Q.E.II Arts Council of N.Z., with a view to providing accommodation and a base venue for the N.Z. contingent to the 3rd Biennale of Sydney. In early April the first of some fifty artists, students, critics and arts administrators began to arrive.

The subsequent six weeks proved to be one of the most stimulating times Side F/X has seen in being used as a focal point for the coordination of the N.Z. artists’ activities, with installations and performances created by them.

One of the highlights of the Biennale period for Side F/X was the banquet prepared for some 60 people by Chinese artist Eva Yuen. Another was the performances of Phil Dadson and From Scratch.

On the program of their performance dates, New Zealand’s ‘From Scratch’ explained the nature of their group. I’ve included it here because I feel it not a bad working premise for any collective.

“Evenness of role — each action, in principle, equally important — each player sometimes to lead, all players sometimes to follow ... The group is a cell. Its codes, fully unpacked, foreshadow a co-operative society. The group’s purpose — to be both fun and fund, to remain potent and to recognise potential in other groups. To assist in every way these growing points within the alien surroundings of a profit motivated society.”

COMMUNITY MEETING PLACE

It was about this time, through contacts made with other eastern-inner-city community and residents groups, that Side F/X became a fortnightly public meeting place. The discussions and further connections made were useful in amalgamating different groups and relating issues concerning real estate development in the area.

Regular meetings also began, alternating between the Garibaldi Community Centre and Side F/X, for discussions and subsequently, working committees to establish an artists union.

Through the inner-city Community Youth Support Scheme (C.Y.S.S.) Side F/X was installed with a darkroom and screen printing workshop. These operated, as did the self defence classes, cheaply as a community resource, tutorials and access being free to the unemployed.

WOMEN'S SPACE

The Darlinghurst Women's Group formed and began weekly meetings here — and in August, an afternoon tea party was advertised in several languages and held with considerable success in the grounds of the Old Marist Bros. School. Out of these meetings a women's march — Reclaim the Night — was organised and went through Darlinghurst and Kings Cross, (on this occasion many of the women felt safe on the notoriously sleazy streets after dark and for the first time without the company of men) demonstrating further the growing solidarity and community feeling which is emerging in the area.

KIDS F/X

During the recent 2 week school vacation period, Side F/X became a child care and activities centre. Initiated by a local resident, Margot Haidinger and several other child care students, the E.C.G. assisted the running of a program for some 25 children of local working parents. Supported by a \$500 grant from Youth and Community Services (Y.A.C.S.) and a small amount made at a benefit fete, the centre was open from 7.30am 'till 6pm weekdays. This created sufficient confidence and enthusiasm amongst the people involved and some of the local community to begin serious consideration of a free, 24 hour child care centre at Side F/X.

During the program, children composed and executed a 10' x 20', billboard-size painting entitled "More Parks for Kids". This was done in collaboration with the Ardwirkz billboard collective, but since their Parramatta road site was out of the eastern city area we decided on one locally — a large vacant wall on the Victoria St. intersection facing Kings Cross — and the painting was pasted up.

We are soon to begin a weekend activities program for children and by the time of publication, will be under way with a large mural on a street level wall of the Side F/X building. Designed and painted by local kids it will be on the theme of environmental improvement — what this street could look like as a park and garden — (and a mural within a mural to please the art heavies.)

A permanent gallery space is also planned to open within the month.

FREE CAKE

Earlier this year E.C.G. members collaborated with Johnny Allen and Cabaret Conspiracy to produce the first issue of a free arts and community newspaper which we called CAKE.

The original concept of this paper was that each monthly edition be put together by a different editorial collective from the various arts and community groups operating within the inner-city. Contacts and skills would be passed on and shared ensuring a more participatory media.

To date, five issues of CAKE have been produced in this way, with varying degrees of success. The editions have become larger and the distribution is now door-to-door, as well as by bundles placed in appropriate shops, bars and cafes.

Each issue has been, and will remain, free barely supported by regular benefit concerts and local business advertising.

The last issue—Cake for Kids—for, about and, to a degree, by kids, focussed largely on the problems of child-care. With its production Side F/X became the home and office of CAKE, a collective made up of previous participants being formed to ensure continuity.

Graphics & articles addressed to the general community — about the arts etc., would be happily used. All material returned. All correspondence to Cake Collective, C/- Side F/X.

WHO'S DEVELOPMENT?

The East City Group has, since the beginning of this year, constantly faced eviction. We have been intimidated and threatened with violence, not to mention the regular visits by trendy business people professing to be the new owners. For some months we had no idea who owned the property. We were informed of its sale and so stopped paying rent to Citicorp. Not once did Citicorp ask us for overdue rent and it wasn't until a local unlicensed real estate dealer heaved us to get out that we were informed of who the current owner was.

To whatever degree of or what ever level a group is communal it will inevitably encounter the need for complete solidarity, if it is to survive and achieve its aims.

The East City Group naively took on a mammoth problem when it became aware of the threat to *its* development, by the threat to what it increasingly saw as community space and its position as community facilitators — dare I say artists.

The rewards of “solidarity” for the employees of the private property developers become the power and prestige of capital expenditure. This brand of mindless solidarity relies on a hierarchy of the profit-motivated and ill-informed.

The private property developers see only the material fibre of a community — the land to provide foundation for housing working clones — and if monopoly can be won, producing power through dollars is the only reward sought. The actions taken by these “developers” and their financiers so far have proven this premise correct.

Where is the law when participation by the community in its own development is denied and secretively avoided through a mass of \$2 companies, legal loopholes and “friends” they’ve helped put in the right places?

Where are our representatives to the State?

The evictions in the Darlington area are widespread yet strategic. Most of the victims are in the low-income category, many being single parent families, students, aged pensioners and protected tenants, intimidated by patrolling armed guards and threats of violence or complex legal action, to the point of leaving the homes they’ve occupied, in some cases for 30-40 years. They leave, often with no money and no where to go. This is not just an emotive description, it is reality.

Where are the creative energies and ideas when this sort of destruction is taking place?

It seems that many people, having gained skills and perhaps intelligent insights into perception/language/communication etc., and having put them into a historical art pigeon-hole, rarely step outside “personal expression” to experiment with the arts/politics of community living — as if a creative future is automatically guaranteed by their artistic efforts.

Where then, are the artists and skilled media workers when human lives are being manipulated like “monopoly pieces”?

Where are the avant-garde members of our society, skilled at performance, at coordinating documentation, at printing processes, at articulating images which communicate other possibilities of development etc., etc?

COMMUNAL DEVELOPMENT OR CONCLUSION?

I’ve gone into, perhaps too much, detail about the events at Side F/X, although I’ve by no means mentioned all the related happenings. I’ve tried to paint an overall picture, so to speak, of the multiplicity of activity that has presented itself to, within and through Side F/X.

It is an on-going process full of contradiction which is not sought to be avoided, rather, creatively disordered.

The snowball has caught us though and the range of possibilities has expanded far beyond what we could have imagined a year ago. We are still enthusiastic and will hopefully continue the experimentation.

There are many and varied concepts of communal living and development, often depending upon the ideals and economic conditioning and of the individual, the state of repair and the architecture of the dwelling and sympathies of the neighbourhood, region or government.

While I don’t believe any group of artists who see themselves as valuable members of community development should underestimate or compromise their potential effectiveness or experimental pursuits, it becomes obvious that the pitfalls are many and the chances of alienation, acute — as the E.C.G. well know.

There are many things we have wanted to do that we’ve not ended up following through, either because of economic problems, naivety or lack of energy (much of the

collective energy required to sustain creative projects and plans for Side F/X has been sapped by the often tedious process of seeking security for a property threatened by million dollar investments).

When your residence is also your studio and simultaneously yours and others' presentation space, then you are opening a great slice of your living and working process to general scrutiny and possible abuse. This situation can be very destructive without a continuing collective self-criticism — sometimes wrought with personal trauma.

On the other hand the rewards of success are the injection and dissemination of information, ideas and energies which aren't frustrated by an institutional art thinking, and forms of creativity that are real, not abstracted to the extent where they can only be understood by initiates.

This is a request for feedback and letters of support. More information can be obtained by writing to East City Group,

PO Box 394

Darlinghurst, 2010

or phone (02) 33-3285

Correspondence will definitely be entered into.

Regards,

RICHARD MAUDE

PS This article is full of holes. During layout several sections had to be deleted because of legal proceedings underway to evict E.C.G.