

It is a surprising fact that the advent of dealer-galleries – in the entrepreneurial form that they exist today – was coeval with the rise of artist-run co-operatives in the second half of the 19th century.

After the famous crisis of the *Salon Des Refuses* in Paris in 1863, anti-academic artists who had suffered the repeated humiliating experience of not being able to get their work into the official State-sponsored, academically-juried Salon began to consider alternative ways of exhibiting their work. Hitherto, the Salon (and its equivalents in other European capital cities) was the only place an artist could establish his or her credentials and launch a career. If the artist's work was rejected, potential buyers and patrons were deterred.

The most powerful challenge to the hegemony of the Salon did not come through the intervention of dealer-galleries, but through artists' own initiatives. At the forefront of the revolt was an organisation which called itself *La Societe Anonyme Des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs etc* . It was an artists-run co-operative which held seven exhibitions between 1874 and 1886. The debut exhibition of the *Societe Anonyme* is better known to us today as the First Impressionist Exhibition.

The persistence of artists' co-operatives into the present day has kept the option of alternatives to the dealer-galleries and State-funded institutions open. It is important that these alternatives exist, succeed, and are seen to succeed, because the overcrowded contemporary marketplace can have a grotesquely distorting and debilitating effect on artists and their work.

“In those towns which seem to enjoy the blessings of peace and where the arts flourish, men suffer more from envy, cares, and anxiety than a besieged town suffers from the scourges of war, for secret vexations are much more cruel than public miseries.” – Voltaire (Candide)

“The circumstances that intellectuals mostly have to do with intellectuals, should not deceive them into believing their own kind still more base than the rest of mankind. For they get to know each other in the most shameful and degrading of all situations, that of competing supplicants, and are thus virtually compelled to show each other their most repulsive sides.” Adorno (Minima Moralia)

In the professionalised and would-be professionalised inner circles of the art world, paranoid, territorial, prima-donnaish behaviour is the norm rather than the exception. In the artists' run co-operative, the opposite is actually the case. Artists can count on more moral support, dialogue and honest feedback from peers. Selling / not selling is not a big issue. A different code of ethics and climate for the reception of work prevails.

The co-operative is almost unique in its capacity to mount a critique of professionalism (or the more perverted kinds of professionalism) which is directly connected to the demands of the marketplace: this can simply be a matter of an artist keeping up appearances, keeping his or her name before the public, getting included in as many exhibitions as possible, and emphasising polish and presentation at the expense of significant content.

That's not to imply that the Union Street Gallery stands for unprofessionalism. One of the reasons for its success in Sydney is that the gallery's steering committee (Debra Dawes, Jeff Gibson, Jelle Van Den Berg and Deborah Singleton) has seen to it that exhibitions have maintained a high standard.

The stylistic differences in the work of artists in the steering committee should make it plain that the co-operative is not a clique or a cabal, and the variety in this exhibition gives an inkling of the range of work the gallery supports. This is no empty

celebration of pluralism, however, since there are convergences in the topics, presentation strategies and forms of a lot of work shown at Union Street. Serial works, photo-narratives, polyptychs and 'constructed photography' are strongly favoured modes.

* *Deconstruction* is practised by Jeff Gibson (who tampers with the word/image rhetoric of newspaper and television news and documentaries), Deborah Singleton (who has explored the masculine/feminine signification of objects and domestic tasks) and Debra Dawes (who has 'exploded' formalist painting).

- *Second Degree*, the Baudrillardian *simulacrum* and '*masquerade*' have had an effect on work by Anne Zahalka and Suzi Coyle's carefully staged or implausibly synthetic photography, and also on some of Geoff Kleem's anamorphic painting/installations which are 'corrected' by monocular camera-vision.

- *The recognition that content, style and form are relative has licensed artists to explore their relativity through eclecticism.* These days, we are accustomed to eclecticism being used cynically (as in East Village art). Jelle Van Den Berg works in several idioms concurrently, but maintains an overall sobriety and restrained lyricism. Deborah Singleton's multifarious quotations all seem to have an element of homage in them, however critical her intent, because she paints them so fastidiously.

- It seems almost unnecessary to single out feminism as a topic because virtually everyone has been affected by it in one way or another. However, Leah Mackinnon's drawings set out to analyse the social construction of femininity and Deborah Singleton, Debra Dawes and Suzi Coyle have all declared an interest in the writings of Luce Irigaray (See the review by Catriona Moore in the Spring 1985 issue of *Art Network*, p56-7) which makes their work a more oblique response to feminist theory. In Sydney we currently have five artists' co-operative galleries. An equal number have gone in the last five years, so we have a good idea of how these organisations succeed or fail.

It is up to the steering committee or founding members to set a standard which will attract good artists to exhibit alongside them. That's all-important for survival, and that's been essential to Union Street's success in building up a following, first among artists and students, secondly among the interested public. Because the gallery is small and somewhat off the beaten track, it could never afford a succession of bad or skimpy shows, which would discourage people from visiting regularly. The concern for the quality of exhibitions and the receptiveness to strong ideas and novel strategies has engendered a solid, loyal following.

Since the time of the Impressionists, artist's co-operatives have stood as small embattled islands of idealism surrounded by the high seas of commerce. In some of these islands, it has been a customary article of faith (inherited from the Impressionists and from the modernist avant-garde) that it is a worthwhile pursuit to problematise (or re-problematise) the act of seeing and interpreting - to make these activities *conscious* and therefore *critical*.

In the absence of a contemporary avant-garde, or rather, in the presence of an avant-garden which is so spectacularised and hostage to institutions and publicity, Union Street's commitment to thoughtful, resilient, modestly provocative exhibitions seems like one of the few real alternatives to the increasingly standardised values, tastes and practises of the contemporary art scene.

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