

Dark Matter, The Underground and Icebergs: potentials and possibilities for artist-run initiatives

When I was young, back in the eighties – a friend and I decided to start a zine. It was very unusual at the time for women to draw comics or make zines. My friend was the most amazing artist – drawing comic book narratives of great sophistication. Inspired by her I started drawing narratives that mashed popular culture genres like sci-fi, detective mysteries and general personal craziness. It was the age of appropriation and the mashup, and it was a strange world far far away. And actually hard to remember, even for me, and I was there... anyway the zine was a book of drawings and comix by women **and** it's what I've come to understand as a proto artist-run.

There was no vibrant artist-run scene in Sydney then. Of course there are celebrated histories of *alternative art spaces* at that time, but this was something that I only read about years later. Let's say I was there, but I wasn't *there there*. Art seemed quite elitist and in response to this feeling of being 'outside' we positioned our actions as following those of earlier "underground comix" that we'd read coming out of southern California.

What we tried to do was create a *community* of women zine-sters – and we did this by instigating an open invitation for women to submit their comics and drawings. We accepted all proposals. Funnily enough today I can't remember how we made the call out. There was no internet of course. No Facebook. No mobile phones, no twitter...

Anyway, the project lasted through six editions and we had an exhibition as well. But by the end of it our friendship was in tatters. The experience had been traumatic. The strain of keeping a project like this going had taken its toll. When thinking back on it I blame the lack of money, the stress of over-work, the lack of support networks, the bad diet -- non-stop cheese-on-toast and coffee does take its toll. But really what I think was missing, was our own lack of ability to think about how and what we were doing, and to *imagine* any future for such a small operation nor how to keep developing our ideas. Rather than an opening it seemed like a dead-end. And this is what I think is significantly different in our current moment. Today there is a large

network in Australia as well as internationally of artists and artist-run spaces that support artists and enable artists to continue practicing beyond the art market and beyond the need for “commercial” success. Today you can be a “successful” and “professional” artist and not be represented by a commercial gallery – a strange contradiction within the neoliberal context of a market-driven world. One of the main reasons for this paradoxical situation – of not needing the market to survive as an artist – is the emergence of artist-run spaces over the past twenty-five years, which in turn has created a cultural space for practicing artists. In other words, the development of artist-run culture has created a sense of possibility and future for many practicing artists. So much so that the artist-run spaces could now be considered an institution of sorts. In fact, the Vancouver conference of 2012, aptly named “Institutions by Artists” declared that artist-runs are “institutions by artists.”¹ The idea of artist-runs as an ‘institution’ is just one of the several ways that artists, critics and commentators have described and imagined these small, independent organisations in recent years.

Things have certainly changed since the 80s, including the development of what can feel like the overwhelming grip of neoliberalism. Today, more than ever, there is a need to imagine spaces and places beyond the narrow market-driven metrics and the ‘economization’ of everyday life of the current neoliberal era. How we think about and value artist-runs is important if we are to support, develop and nurture a vibrant art community, and to see the possibilities and potentials of artist-runs. The way we imagine them matters.

In this essay I will explore different ways that artists and critics have imagined artworld relations – which includes artist-runs. I will focus on three distinct frameworks, including from the 1960s/70s the figure of ‘the underground’ recently reworked by Lucas Ihlein; Gregory Sholette’s powerful metaphor ‘dark matter’ and the more recent conception of ‘institutions by artists’. However, as we now live within and are saturated by, what political theorist Wendy Brown calls, “the governing rationality”² of neoliberalism I will call upon another theorist, the feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham, and their model of the ‘iceberg’ to help open up the possibilities and potentials and insights that all three figures provide for a fuller understanding of the cultural economy of artist-run spaces, with a particular focus on the Australian situation.

Underground

The ‘underground’ is a familiar term most often associated with the past – it immediately evokes 1960s and 1970s alternative, radical and counter cultural activities and attitudes. It has been characterized as

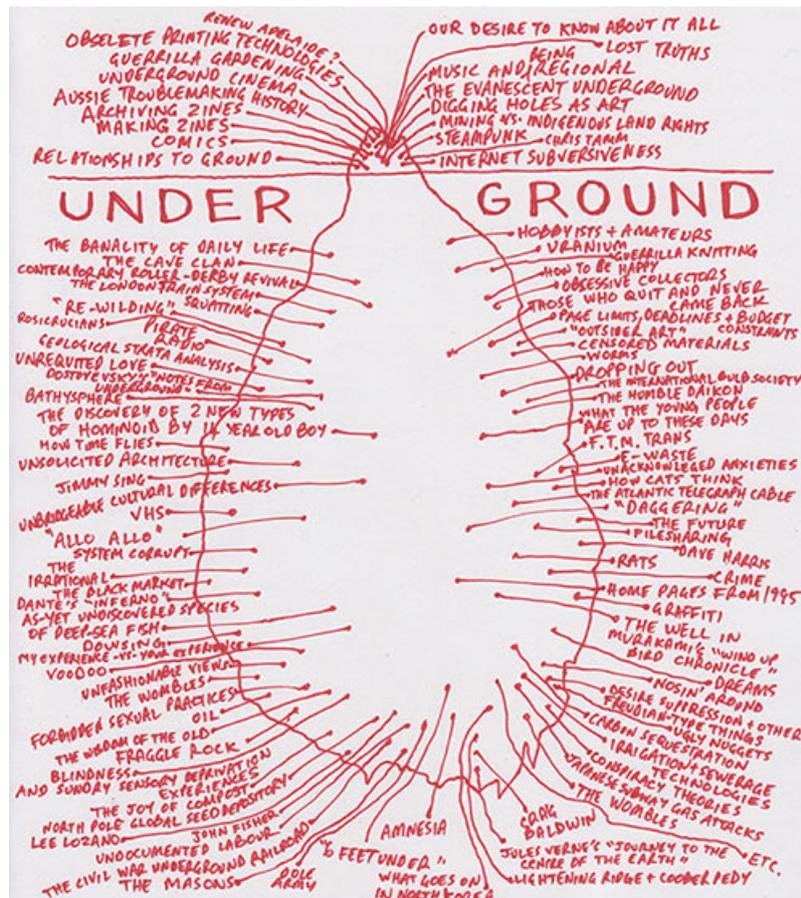
subversive secretive dissident alternative covert concealed rebellious revolutionary
insubordinate seditious insurrectionary destabilising rebel unorthodox
nonconforming nonconformist disobedient adventurous questioning unpredictable
unfamiliar exceptional irregular unexpected. (Urquhart 2010)

The underground is usually understood as something hidden from the mainstream and to be there is to occupy a position of resistance and opposition, even if briefly.

Several years ago, (2010) the well-known Australian art magazine, *Artlink*, published an issue devoted to the figure of “the underground,” edited by the Australian artist Lucas Ihlein – himself an artist who’s been active in a number of artist-runs, the most recent and current being Big Fag Press. The Underground issue was not simply an historical summing up or looking back at what once was; rather the magazine comprised a series of essays with a lively discussion of the possibilities for the figure of ‘the underground’ *now*, along with its historical baggage. Ihlein’s interest in the term was in its continued relevance for all sorts of hidden and subversive activity today, including what he calls “marginal and experimental art.”

On first seeing the front cover drawing – one of Ihlein’s signature mapping drawings – I imagined it was detailing the different historical or current practices that consider themselves ‘underground’ or are considered underground by others. However, on closer inspection I realized I was wrong. His intriguing schematic gave me the uncanny sense that I was looking at something fantastic - as in preposterous - and perhaps inspired by one of those alternate taxonomies described by the writer Jorge Luis Borges in his 1942 essay, “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” and later quoted by Foucault in his introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. On second thoughts it brought to mind a post-humanist mapping - bringing together all sorts of objects and things, human, non-human and vegetable, and thus creating an assemblage – an uncanny network both humorous and quirky and deadly serious. So

what was he charting? According to Ihlein, the front cover drawing “was a way of charting things that were included in the magazine (above the line) versus things that didn't make it into the magazine (below the line).” Here’s a sample of some of those things listed as *below* the line -- “Guerilla knitting, How to be Happy, Obsessive Collectors, Outsider Art, Home Pages from 1995, The Well in Murakami’s “Windup Bird Chronicle”, E Waste, Rats, What Young kids are Up to these days, How Cats Think...and so on.



Underground image from Artlink front cover, courtesy Lucas Ihlein

For Ihlein ‘the underground’ evokes a literal and corporeal relationship with the ground; his interest he writes is “as a relationship with and under the ground.” This makes perfect sense in Australia where the ground is a very contested place, where Indigenous people’s knowledge systems have always been focused on the ground beneath our feet, rather than to the heavens. And where mining and a wealth of mineral resources are an ever present battleground between massive international mining corporations and local communities, environmentalists and all of us concerned

with the state of the planet. So of course the front cover graphic lists above ground, “mining + land rights, digging as art form, relationship to ground...and so on.”

In a feature essay in the magazine, Chris Fleming sketches a brief history of the term, describing it as “a post WWII phenomenon” borrowing its name from the European resistance movements against Fascism and German occupation. In reviving this older term Ihlein brings together artist/activist/permaculture farmers/ and others ‘under’ the one cover, so to speak. In this particular assemblage art becomes one amongst many in a network of things and transactions, relationships and experiences. Through constant movement between the above and below ground, nothing is fixed either underground or above ground. Ihlein writes,

In culture, marginal practices are continually being unearthed and made visible to broader communities, which accommodate, and thus transform, them into acceptable ‘mainstream’ forms (correspondingly, the mainstream culture expands and transforms itself in the process). Throughout the twentieth century, this cycle of unearthing became so commonplace that it is now almost impossible to uphold ‘mainstream-vs-underground’ as a credible dichotomy. Rather, the two seem locked in an expansive, co-dependent dance. (Ihlein 2010)

This way of thinking contemporary “underground” pushes against positivist notions of progress or bigger and better. With Ihlein’s reconception of ‘underground’ art practice is figured as specific and situated, multiple and surprising; coming into view and moving away again, but never in a straight forward movement of progress. This way of thinking of a contemporary ‘underground’ makes space and imagines space for artist-runs too to be included along with the myriad other stuff that Ihlein lists as underground. In this scenario Ihlein denies a sense of absolute opposition or outsider-ness to these ‘underground’ things, realizing that occupying a position of purity or total separateness is probably not possible or even desirable today. Ihlein’s image of the underground is expansive, inclusive and in constant motion, as practices are ‘unearthed’ and/or go underground in a never-ending cycle or “co-dependent dance.”

Dark Matter

In a recent book about contemporary art, and in particular the New York artworld, Gregory Sholette unfurls a powerful and compelling metaphor to describe the inequitable and hierarchical relations that exist for artists – that metaphor is ‘dark matter.’ The figure ‘dark matter’ is borrowed from theoretical astrophysics, where

scientists describe our universe as made up of mostly unknown and unseen matter and energy, in fact they suggest that this missing mass could form **ninety-five percent** of the universe. This startling figure of invisible energy is thought to hold the rest of the visible universe together – “the gravity generated by this “dark matter” stabilizes the five percent of the visible universe that we exist within” (Sholette, nd). Sholette applies this spooky hypothesis to the world of art and culture where the number of total artists as a percentage of the tiny number shown in downtown galleries and major museums in New York is much the same percentage as dark matter.

A bit like Dante’s vision of Hell, it is within this dark matter that one will find artist-runs along with hobbyists and Sunday painters as well as ‘failed’ professional artists. And like the ‘real’ dark matter, it is this huge mass that ultimately sustains the official artworld. In fact it is crucial to its very existence, not only through artists’ hopes and dreams and desires that one day they too will be the chosen ones, but also through the mundane daily activities of “purchasing art supplies, trade magazines, and museum memberships” through teaching, and performing all the unacknowledged roles that sustain the system, “like studio assistants, interns (often unpaid), adjunct teachers (always underpaid), art fabricators and installers and so on” (Sholette, nd). In this narrative, dark matter plays a crucial role in the overall inequitable system. It’s a great pyramid with a mass of people grounding the structure at the bottom and a tiny number who shine brightly at the top where the artworld aficionados like critics, curators, collectors, museums and arts administrators rule supreme.

Inspired by the art historian Carol Duncan’s observation in 1984 that “the majority of professionally trained artists make up a vast surplus whose redundancy is the normal condition of the art market” (Sholette nd). Sholette asks “what if we turned this figure and ground relation inside out by imagining an art world unable to exclude the practices and practitioners it secretly depends upon?” (Sholette 2011: 3) Sholette goes on to suggest one such possibility for a different and more equitable artworld, and that is peer-to-peer networks. In this he is borrowing from online computer networks where the horizontal nature of relations can cross the globe, networking people without the need of major institutions and other hierarchical ways of relating. Like ‘the underground’ it is the figure of DIY, or do-it-yourself that is the salient aesthetic. And Sholette suggests a peer-to-peer network could be one of support where artists

can bypass art dealers, critics and galleries.

And perhaps this offers another way of thinking about artist-runs as well, that is, as a peer-to-peer network that acts through offline spaces as well as online sites and blogs. These spaces, like their online P2P networks have the capacity to connect artists nationally and internationally, locally and globally. But, one of the problems for me with Sholette's 'dark matter' thesis is the way it collapses the artworld into the art market – as if the two were co-extensive. Rather than co-extensive I would suggest there are multiple art worlds, locally, nationally and internationally – of course these *other* artworlds may overlap or run parallel to the art market, but they are not the same thing. There is a danger with Sholette's dark matter thesis of denying cultural and social values that sustain lives, but that may not be visible to the art market and therefore not valued. Sholette's neo-marxist analysis risks reducing complex situations and dynamic processes to economic determinism. Instead I see within these multiple activities and structures we are calling artist-runs, the possibility and potential for quite different and specific sorts of relations between artists and their publics and themselves that extend beyond the particular sort of political art activities that attract Sholette, which limit the potentials and possibilities to be imagined to a somewhat narrow field– usually tactical media art. And as I'm hoping to underline in this essay– this imagining and opening out to multiple possibilities of how to make/exhibit art is one of the strengths and gifts of artist-runs.

Institutions by Artists

In 2012 the *Institutions by Artists* Convention was held in Vancouver, Canada. Its inspired and inspiring title at once contradicts the expected understandings of the *institution of art*, which is usually defined by the museum and gallery system. Instead, through an inversion of sorts “institutions by artists” begins a new conceptualization of art and artists and art making. By foregrounding artistic self-determination and the collective activity of artists themselves, this inversion shifts the ground of art as well as the idea of what we commonly call the institution of art. For the organizers of the convention this shift in thinking about the institution of art “thus deterritorializes its discursive formation by wresting it from the gallery and museum, and relocating it in a field of relations among artists living and working in the world.” (Khonsary and Podesva 2012:13).

This shift in how we conceptualize art through the shift in language is not insignificant. The ramifications are enormous, shifting art away from traditional sites of exhibition like museums and galleries to the activities and organisations that artists' create. Yet it is not just the shift in and reconceiving of artworld relations, now centred on artists and their activities and organisations, but it reconfigures the idea of "institution" itself.

In their introductory essay to the accompanying book, *Institutions by Artists*, Jeff Khonsary and Kristina Lee Podesva reflect upon what some considered "the failure of the self determination paradigm" in Canadian artist-run Centres where "artists no longer seemed to have control over the institutions they created" (Khonsary and Podesva 2012:15). As confirmation of this estrangement between artist-run centres and artists in Canada, a Canadian curator admitted during a presentation at the conference, that artists are no longer involved in artist-run centres in Canada. They are mainly run by curators and administrators. To the assembled gathering, this seemed both surprising and ominous. In the essay "The Transfiguration of the Bureaucrat" AA Bronson concludes that "the artists of Canada have transformed themselves into bureaucrats, much as those of New York City have shape-shifted into simulacra of financiers. I warned of this danger, already so evident, in the early 80s. Now it is too late" (Khonsary and Podesva 2012:16). Nevertheless he also goes on to describe a new sort of artist, one who doesn't need galleries, museums or artist-run centres in order to be an artist. For Khonsary and Podesva this transfigured artist "goes far in exemplifying what we mean here in reference to institutions by artists as a practice" (Khonsary and Podesva 2012:16). In reimagining institutions by artists as a practice Khonsary and Podesva first reimagine and reconsider the very idea of an institution. They do this through the writings of Portuguese anthropologist João de Pina-Cabral. According to de Pina-Cabral, current understandings of "institution" are based on a "'Cartesian view of mind' in which persons 'pre-exist intersubjective attunement'" (cited in Khonsary and Podesva 2012:16). He argues after Foucault, that "human subjectivity does not precede institutions and that institutions are not static entities nor the amalgamation of individuals, but rather relational processes of becoming" (cited in Khonsary and Podesva 2012:17).

In short, to institute is to prop up, to grant entity status to a certain aspect of the

world by situating it relationally. It is an exercise in prospective memory, as it involves recognising that a set of patterns will thenceforth concur. Instituting, thus, is a future-oriented gesture that invests a set of patterns with conditions of continuity: it is a singularity project. Furthermore, as humans are in the world socially, the project-nature of instituting is necessarily coextensive with sociality. (de Pina-Cabral 2011:492)

By “institutions” Khonsary and Podesva shift normalised understandings of “institution” away from a static, staid and essentially hierarchical idea of structure where “persons ‘pre-exist intersubjective attunement.’” (Khonsary and Podesva 2012: 16) And away from a once much maligned idea, of a bureaucratized, closed, managerial system that avant-garde artists, and in particular those associated with alternative spaces, sought to resist.

The iceberg

In 2014 I happened to attend a symposium titled “Cultural Transformations, Technology and Urban Development” at Aarhus University, Denmark. The main speaker that day was Katherine Gibson a feminist economic geographer. In her talk she unfurled a radical rethink of what we glibly call “the economy”. These two words seem to be on everyone’s lips, from all sides of politics. “it’s the economy, stupid” is a common phrase. Yet, as Wendy Brown teaches us in her book *Undoing the Demos* the use of the definite article before ‘economy’ is a very recent phenomenon. This reification of ‘the economy’ has become an obsessive chant from our politicians and introduces us to the ‘economization’ of all aspects of life. Featured prominently in Gibson’s talk was an image of an iceberg, drawn schematically to show the hidden ‘economies’ below the surface of our dominant view. The iceberg image and metaphor was the result of a collaboration between Katherine Gibson and the late Julie Graham. For two decades they wrote collaboratively under a hyphenated name “J. K. Gibson-Graham.” Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham’s project, which they outline with great clarity in their book *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)* is to expand our idea of what constitutes The Economy and so allow us to better see all of the hidden activities and micro-economies that make up real world living – such as small organisations like artist-run spaces.



The iceberg image courtesy Katherine Gibson

When I first saw this image of the iceberg I was struck by its seeming similarity to both Ihlein’s ‘underground’ image and Sholette’s dark matter metaphor. All three posit an invisible yet huge mass of activity/people, below the surface, just out of sight. For Ihlein the people and activities are in constant motion and always moving between underground and above ground, (strikingly, this is exactly what has happened to the PAD/A archive of political art protests from the 1980s, that Sholette, a member, documents. This archive is now housed in the MOMA archive, above ‘ground’.) If Ihlein’s image imagines the world, including artworld relations as a constantly moving assemblage of things, Sholette’s is a stark metaphor of inequality, which focuses on the artmarket, in particular the New York art world/market. It’s an image of occlusion and deceit. But for Gibson-Graham this activity below the surface points to strategic possibilities. Rather than getting depressed about the intractable

nature of inequality and hyper-capitalism, they propose a shift in thinking.

What if we were to accept that the goal of thinking is not to extend knowledge by confirming what we already know, that the world is a place of domination and oppression? What if instead we thought about openings and strategic possibilities in the cracks? (Gibson-Graham 2012: 37)

Gibson-Graham's thesis is very much one of finding openings and possibilities in the cracks. They are interested in going beyond describing and "confirming what we already know." Rather they are interested in ways of opening up potentials and possibilities for action. And they do this through a radical rethink of *how* we think about our own activities. In particular, their thesis suggests that *how* we think about such weighty concepts as Capitalism and Neo-liberalism does have an effect on how we create and imagine other possibilities - in particular the possibility for living in, what they call a non-capitalist world or even a post-capitalist world - where caring for each other and the environment around us are important values. In other words Gibson-Graham's critique focuses on "the limiting effects of representing economies as dominantly capitalist. Central to [their] project is the idea that economies are always diverse and always in the process of becoming." (*Community Economies* nd)

Along with Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, Gibson-Graham are interested in rethinking closed and essential concepts. In particular, they are intent on rethinking the bounded and totalizing ways that "capitalism" is formulated from both sides of politics. They write, "Identity, whether of the subject or society, cannot be seen as the property of a bounded and centered being that reveals itself in history. Instead, identity is open, incomplete, multiple, shifting." (Gibson-Graham 2006: 12) In their book they aim to "problematize 'capitalism' as an economic and social descriptor."

They argue that

most economic discourse is 'capitalo-centric' ...meaning that other forms of economy are often understood primarily with reference to capitalism: as being fundamentally the same as (or modeled upon) capitalism, or as being deficient or substandard imitations; as being opposite to capitalism; as being the complement of capitalism; as existing in capitalism's space or orbit. Thus non-capitalist practices like self-employment may be seen as taking place *within* capitalism, which is understood as an embracing structure or system. (Gibson-Graham 2006: 6)

For Gibson-Graham the capitalo-centric discourse makes "it difficult to entertain a

vision of the prevalence and vitality of non-capitalist economic forms, or of daily or partial replacements of capitalism by non-capitalist economic practices” (Gibson-Graham 2006: 3) and what this means is that “‘capitalist hegemony’ operates not only as a constituent of, but also as a brake upon the anti-capitalist imagination.” (3) They ask, “What difference might it make to release that brake and allow an anti-capitalist economic imaginary to develop unrestricted?” (3) In other words, Gibson-Graham propose that we imagine a different set of social relations and even more they show us that *other* economies are operating right now. In the face of current disaster scenarios they replace the cry of despair “what is to be done?” with “What is being done right now?” It is here that I sense artist-runs already play a noteworthy role. And that is because in their diversity artist-runs do have the potential to create spaces of difference and different cultural economies. Artist-run spaces can offer the promise of self-determination and independence, as well as possibilities for sharing between artists and their audiences and publics, all of whom help nurture and build them.

From gift economy to DIY: Australian artist-run initiatives

In my recent research in Australia I’ve found a great diversity among artist-runs. In the rest of this essay I’ll share with you a few examples of artist-runs in Australia that have pushed against the limits of the bureaucratized artist-run to create innovative spaces, places and relations. But first let me briefly contextualize what’s happening in Australia and how ARIs are being discussed and imagined. One common notion is that ARIs are about preparation for a ‘proper’ gallery career and entrance to the art market. And, of course, they can be a great training ground for young and emerging artists to learn exhibition practices and procedures. But as Alex Gawronski outlines in his essay for the *We are Here* symposium in Sydney in 2011, the idea that artist-runs are simply for emerging artists to learn their craft is “fallacious.” He writes that this way of thinking about ARIs is “misleading” and “limiting” and suggests “there are in fact ways that the scope and capabilities of ARIS could be greatly expanded for critical rather than expedient ends” (Gawronski 2011: 70-73). Gawronski makes an important point, and highlights a larger project for artist-runs than ‘incubator’ for young artists. This is, in fact, happening currently in Australia with some artist-runs creating a network across the country including both spaces that are gallery-like and others that create communities of artists through events, libraries and other activities.

I am not suggesting that there is an either/or situation for artists between commercial galleries and artist-runs. It is quite common for a well-known artist showing at a commercial gallery to also participate and exhibit in artist-runs. In this sense I am particularly interested in what could be considered a *parallel performance*, sometimes a simultaneous one, where there are other ways of performing an artist's life, of imagining a way to proceed. Even if individual artist-runs can be short-lived and temporary, they nevertheless bring forth in each instance the ongoing gesture of imagining something else. This, I think is their power and their promise, and their contribution to imagining different artworld relations. Two figures help us understand this: gift economy and DIY culture.

In Lewis Hyde's classic study *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*, he begins by stating: "a work of art is a gift, not a commodity." And he goes on to write: "works of art exist simultaneously in two 'economies,' a market economy and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift there is no art" (Hyde 2007: xiv). Tellingly, Hyde writes how past societies – and some current – have measured worth through the amount of gifts given. However, the mythology of our own market-driven world reverses this older and other value system where "*getting* rather than giving is the mark of a substantial person" (Hyde 2007: xvi). In today's economized and market-driven world, where the only measurement of value is that of the market, the artist's labour can feel inconsequential and trivialized. Why would you bother? It's not going to make you any money. With little to sustain the inner life of an artist in such a mercantile world, Hyde's classic study highlights the need to understand the work of artists, as well as the work of art itself, as a gift. He writes:

the spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation. If this is the case, then the gifts of the inner world must be accepted as gifts in the outer world if they are to retain their vitality. Where gifts have no public currency, therefore, where the gift as a form of property is neither recognized nor honored, our inner gifts will find themselves excluded from the very commerce which is their nourishment? (Hyde 2007:xvi)

In other words, exclusive market values can kill the spirit of the gift. The gift economy is one of the many models of commerce that floats beneath the waters of Gibson-Graham's iceberg. It is an economy that relies on circulation, relationships and connections. And it is this model of commerce that I suggest is most often

associated with artist-run spaces, where people donate their labour and time to sustain the organization or activity and thus create an economy of generosity and circulation.

DIY is one of the hallmarks of these projects where artists are placing value on their own work and the work of fellow artists in a spirit reminiscent of a punk sensibility of the late 1970s and 1980s. Punk as a subculture and social phenomenon is often associated only with punk rock and the Sex Pistols, but as Greil Marcus suggests in his sweeping epic, *Lipstick Traces: a secret history of the 20th century*, the Punk philosophy of the late 1970s was imbued with social values that could be traced through various early art and socially progressive movements and ideas such as DADA and the Situationist International with their social critique of late capitalist society. A significant feature of Punk philosophy was its turning away from authority, and the perceived passivity of post-war consumer culture, to a valuing of one's own culture, and in particular to the value of *making* one's own culture – hence punk rock's emphasis on noise and being together over expertise and masterfulness. There was a sense that one could make one's own culture from wherever you were in the world. In Australia one can find the gift relations and DIY practices enlivening many artist-runs – as we can see in the following examples.

Garage ARIs

Garage and home or apartment ARIs are a significant practice in Australia – some long lasting and others more ephemeral. **Marrickville Garage** is an artist-run in the inner-western suburb of Marrickville, Sydney. Marrickville Garage is literally a garage in the backyard of a large suburban house. The artists Jane Polkinghorne and Sarah Newall have shared the rented house for over a year, although Jane has lived in the house for more than a decade. Over the summer of 2012 /2013 the artists worked hard to turn the semi-derelict space into a DIY workable studio- cum exhibition space. According to the artists the space was to serve two purposes, one as studio/workshop space for themselves, and then once a month they would give it over to the art community providing a free space for artists for presentation and discussion of their work. And it was important that the space be provided free of charge for the invited artists to show their work -- just a brief explanation about this. In my short time in Copenhagen I had the opportunity to interview artists from only three different artist-

runs [Sydhavn Station](#), [Odradek](#) and [Toves](#). In our discussions the Copenhagen artists informed me that artists are invited to show in their spaces free of charge. The spaces are organized in such a way that the collective of artists pay ongoing rent for studio space, and to be part of the collective – not the visiting artists. I’ve found this is not how it works in most cases in Australia. At present there are around 100 artist-runs across Australia, and the majority of spaces in Sydney and Melbourne are structured in such a way that invited artists who show in these spaces usually pay for the space. In other words they pay a fee to rent the space, usually for a three to four week run.

In the case of Marrickville Garage, given the artists were using their garage, which meant no extra rental costs involved, they had the opportunity to *share* this space with other artists, rather than charge them a fee. I think that this immediately changes the relationships between all those concerned. The transaction is now a gift rather than a rental fee. And the exhibition becomes a negotiation between all those involved. It is this gift economy that Gibson-Graham also theorize as part of hidden economies that populate the actual world where energies and time are freely given, but go unacknowledged by formal analysis of The Economy and thus undervalued. And, as I’ve suggested it is just such economies that need to be valued, and their potentials nurtured and explored. I visited the project one Friday evening in August, it was an opening yet had the distinct feeling of a backyard party, except that there was something exhilarating about visiting a backyard art gallery deep in suburbia. It was exhilarating to feel part of breaking out of expectations and the usual ways of being together in domestic spaces – and thus charging the space in a new way – with a charge that everyone seemed to feel.

For Marrickville Garage the gift economy extends beyond artworld boundaries to include the local neighbourhood – in particular their local street. In early 2013 the artists participated in the local art trail or tour, instigated by Marrickville Council, and they organized a front yard sculpture show, a bit like sculpture-by-the-sea-in-the-suburbs – where they asked every house in their street if they would like to contribute their front yard for the event—which meant artists presented work in each yard. Every house said yes. And with great enthusiasm. The event drew the neighbours out into the street each weekend for a month – and in this they too were enabled to gift their yards to the artists and the whole event.

The Rumpus Room, another quite different garage artist-run, initiated by artist Ashlee Laing from his home in an inner-western suburb of Melbourne also operates from within a ‘gift economy.’ Like Marrickville Garage, The Rumpus Room doesn’t charge artists to show their work. There’s a liveliness and excitement to this project where the garage acts as a DIY project space for artists to try out ideas, including performances, and test materials, and it attracts a mixed group of people to come and see what the artist has been up to.

The emphasis here is much more on play and process, rather than finished outcomes or fully resolved work. And the garage has not been painted white or made into a white cube. It is simply a garage and artists work within its unchanged state. As Laing says on his website, “Remaining true to the definition of rumpus room, The Rumpus Room is all about mucking around with stuff, ideas, having fun and playing.” (Rumpus Room blog) The evening of my visit a noisy crowd of people had gathered around an open fire in the backyard, eating barbequed sausages and drinking beer. It was a very convivial atmosphere, and again felt like a charged social space.

ARIs occupying public spaces

Besides the ARIs occupying more traditional gallery or white cube spaces, there are others that find public spaces to inhabit. *Plinth Projects* is an artist-run public art program engaging an empty plinth in one of Melbourne’s inner city gardens, Edinburgh Gardens. The plinth has stood on this spot since 1901 – originally erected to hold a statue of Queen Victoria, but at some point in the past the statue went missing in mysterious circumstances, leaving the plinth empty for many years. Over a period of twelve months, The Plinth Projects managed to show a range of compelling artists’ projects that engaged the Plinth and in turn engaged a wide and eclectic public. Sarah CrowEST’s strange, not-quite-human blob-sculpture stood erect for several months of varied winter weather, through rain, hail and sleet. It began as a whitish human shaped blob and in time changed colour – from white to a dirty pink. It weathered the weather and grew into itself. In October the plinth was covered in Renee Cosgrave’s startling and colourful swatches of paint. The plinth was a constraint and a provocation, with some artists, like CrowEST using it as a base to place her sculpture, while others like Cosgrave used the plinth itself as a canvas or

surface for painting. All the work provoked wonder and excitement as people walked in the park or cycled by, and entangled the practice of ‘public art’ with ARI relations.

In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Jane Bennett challenges the view that modern life is a world empty of wonder or enchantment, the view that we live in a world of scientific facts and cold rationality. Bennett argues instead that not only are there still moments of enchantment that we can experience as moderns, but that it is important that we do so, as it may just be such experiences that could motivate ethical behavior in our relations to our world. On my rides past the Plinth, CrowEST’s figure and Cosgrave’s startling paintings would arouse both wonder and amusement – and surely this is one of art’s particular jobs – to make us look, listen and sense again and to make us wonder. And perhaps this is what Bennett is referring to when she suggests that it is the joy of wonder that may just convince us to relate to our world differently.

Tarp Space is a mobile artist-run initiative, utilizing a blue tarpaulin to create a temporary space of art and for art. It operated for twelve months during 2013. The project emphasized a trans-localness by literally travelling across Australia to make projects with local artists and utilising the very humble blue tarpaulin as a material, a medium and a marker of space. Like a game of magic, the blue tarpaulin demarcates that *this* is the space for art. The artists write that their aim was “to extend the physical and conceptual space of an art space.” (TarpSpace, website)

TarpSpace was managed by Henry Jock Walker, Jessie Lumb and Brad Lay, three artists based in Adelaide, South Australia. They began their journey by first calling for proposals from artists around Australia and from these they selected one project from each state – or eight projects in total. They chose works that they thought “best embodied ideas of pushing the boundaries of what an art space can be and where it can be presented...” Rather than receive artwork to show in a centralized space, TarpSpace travelled to where the art was being made – the ultimate site-specific art space.

Conclusion

In conclusion I’d like to return to one of the artist-run festival themes: What does the artist-run space contribute to a contemporary art scene at large? The short answer to

that would be the broadening and the opening out of the art scene to a myriad of possibilities and potentials. In a word they imagine diversity. I'd also like to propose that artist-runs offer the possibility of different relations between artists and their work and to each other and to their publics through co-operation and collaboration – different to either commercial or public galleries and museums. They can create generosity through a gift economy and they can be nimble and responsive to the world right now, in DIY modes. They are often small operations, which does matter, as a different logic is at play through scale.

In thinking about the contribution of artist-runs in a broader sense I am taken back once more to Jane Bennett's work on enchantment. Bennett's book *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, sets out, not only to rehabilitate the notion of enchantment in our modern, exhausted and cynical lives, but importantly she discusses how and why such experience is crucial to the performance of an ethical life. She points out that the narrative that posits an image of modernity as disenchanting, rational and empty of 'magic' or 'wonder' is problematic and discourages affective attachment to the world we live in. She posits that it is this attachment, this loving of life that can propel generosity and an ethical engagement. In other words, we need to love it - the world that is - to care for it. Bennett writes, "Enchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies, one of those strategies might be to give greater expression to the sense of play another to hone sensory receptivity to the marvelous specificity of things." (Bennett 2001: 4) And isn't this one of the goals of art to encourage "play" and nurture "sensory receptivity" to develop "wonder" and understand the "marvelous specificity of things?"

Finally let me return to the importance of *imagining* and how we imagine artist-runs. Following Gibson-Graham's idea that "how we imagine, frame and talk" about artist-runs influences how we create them and how we use them. This approach has a great affinity with Bennett's sense of the importance of active participation in revealing wondrous worlds right now. I think this is where artist-run spaces can contribute not just to the art scene at large, but to a broader conversation about the value of art, not as a commercial or commodified product, but as a community of artists invested in making work and engaging in and through the world. Artist-runs have the potential to

create spaces where artists can engage with expanded notions of artmaking, can push against the deadening hand of bureaucratic artspeak, and the vagaries of the art market. In sum they can be spaces of enchantment and wonder, where gifts are circulated and where new practices and relations play out.

End Notes:

1. *Institutions by Artists* is the name of an important convention held in Vancouver, Canada in 2012, accompanied by an eponymous publication. By “institutions” the writers and organisers sought to shift normalised understandings of “institution” away from a static, staid and essentially hierarchical idea of structure where “persons ‘pre-exist intersubjective attunement.’”

2. “To speak of the relentless and ubiquitous economization of all features of life by neoliberalism is thus not to claim that neoliberalism literally *marketizes* all spheres, even as such marketization is certainly one important effect of neoliberalism. Rather, the point is that neoliberal rationality disseminates *the model of the market* to all domains and activities – even where money is not at issue – and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*.” (Brown, 2015: 31)

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Artist-Run Initiatives:

Marrickville Garage <http://marrickvillegarage.com>

Plinth Projects <http://plinthprojects.com>

The Rumpus Room <http://rumpusgarage.blogspot.com.au>

TarpSpace: <https://www.facebook.com/TarpSpace/>