Artist-run Initiatives and University Restructure

So we have a clear shift in terms of the debate from the notion of an arts industry to that of a cultural economy. This is not merely a shift in language for the sake of contemporaneity, but rather recognition that the framework of the new economy is much changed from that of the nineteenth-century industrial model.

Su Baker, Art School 2.0: Art Schools in the Information Age or Reciprocal Relations and the Art of the Possible.

In recent times “restructure” has become a byword for devastating and destructive cuts across a whole range of industries and workplaces in Australia and internationally, both public and private.¹ Hidden from the more direct and obvious impacts are significant indirect effects. In the case of the visual arts in Australia the flow-on effects of restructuring and downsizing in the tertiary arts education sector will be, and is, the serious loss of job opportunities for artists. In this paper I will point to how artist-run initiatives and artists associated with them are indirectly affected by government cuts to universities.² I will argue that this indirect effect is linked to the emergence, in recent times, of the increasing number of artists who are working from within the university sector through practice-based research and/or gaining higher degrees. This shift of art practice has spawned a creative arts culture for artists, centred on universities rather than just the art market or public art institutions. It is within universities that artists have found a haven through either employment as teachers, researchers and administrators or through further study.³

Artist-Run Initiatives in the Cultural Economy

Artist-run initiative or ARI is an over-arching term that refers to artist-run spaces and the various activities associated with these spaces. The term is specific to Australia – and quite recent – although the phenomenon is a global one.⁴ Artist-run spaces, initially referred to as, “alternative spaces” emerged 40 years ago out of the social upheavals of the 1960s, with counter-cultural ideas such as DIY and resistance to capitalism’s constant need to commodify, as well as specific developments within the art-world. In Australia the emergence of artists’ spaces are usually associated with neo avant-garde art practices that were at first unacceptable to the status quo. Artists like Mike Parr, Tim Johnson and Peter Kennedy in Sydney, for instance, founded Inhibodress, often cited as Australia’s first alternative art space. As Sue Cramer writes
in her monograph on Inhibodress, “Inhibodress was born at the beginning of the seventies as a part of that moment in Australia (1968-1972) when in the eyes of a number of young art practitioners, the implications of formalist art had reached their furthermost extreme…This new conceptual work explored art’s inextricable links with the world, with philosophy and politics with society and its institutions.” (Cramer 5) ARIs today share this history with alternative spaces, however, they are now widely recognised by both artists and audiences as a significant and integral part of the arts ecology, and crucially, have been theorised as “institutions by artists”. (Khonsary and Podesva).^5

ARIs, driven by artists’ own passions and commitments, are not tied to any one specific economic model. Over the years many have been funded through the Australia Council for the Arts in various and different ways.^6 However, on the whole, ARIs run on volunteer labour and strong commitments of time and energy by artists themselves. What does the current neo-liberal moment of restructure and redundancy across the public sector mean for ARIs? What sort of impact will “austerity” have on the running of ARIs and on the artists involved? Without aiming to predict the future, pondering these questions will necessarily bring into view the important broader picture of how and where artists are implicated in the public sector, particularly for this paper, in the universities, through education and employment.

Today ARIs are very diverse and not necessarily associated with specific art movements or tied to ideologies about art. They have evolved into a recognized, sometimes even institutionalized, sector of the arts community. They are usually small, independent, non-commercial spaces where artists may create not just exhibition opportunities but cultural events, publications, critical dialogue, and in general provide an alternative to the art market. Significantly they also create a community of artists with one of the distinguishing features of an ARI being its sociality, ‘situatedness’ and grassroots network of local artists and audiences. As Dan Rule notes, “…the artist-led organization’s real potency and value comes down to something far less immediately tangible or quantifiable. Community may be something of a hackneyed term, but it’s also a notion that has been central to the history of art making…” (Rule, 9)
It is this idea of a ‘community of artists’ that I would argue connects ARIs to the Community Economies Research Network – a group of researchers theorizing and “enacting new visions of economy.” Their project, developing out of J. K. Gibson-Graham’s feminist critique of political economy, “that focused upon the limiting effects of representing economies as dominantly capitalist,” seeks to understand how to build and sustain non-capitalist economic alternatives. (Community Economies Project 2009.) This is a powerful and suggestive idea for anyone seeking to understand ARIs as vital places of art production beyond enterprise capitalism’s focus on the art market and the profit motive, and to what Helen Hughes, in her short talk at Brisbane’s IMA, referred to as “contemporary arts assimilation with the entertainment and tourism industries…”

One notable feature of ARI culture that is significant for thinking about this connection is the absence of any leaders or epicentre. Rather, there is a loose network of these artist organizations across the globe, and looked at as a phenomenon or movement they bear some resemblance to Gibson-Graham’s characterization of “[T]he practice of feminism as ‘organizational horizontalism’.” In writing about feminist organizational practice Gibson-Graham write: “[T]he movement achieved global coverage without having to create global institutions…Ubiquity rather than unity was the ground of its globalization.” (Gibson-Graham xxiii-iv: 2006)

**The Expansion of Art**

In order to understand the link between artists involved in ARIs and their relationship to work in the public sector, in particular the university sector, it is important to note the overall expansion of the arts over the past thirty years both in Australia and globally. Paul Gladston, writing in the art magazine Broadsheet, in 2014, writes of the enormous expansion of art production in the United States since WWII, quoting the art historian Brandon Taylor he writes, “…during the early 1940s there were a mere handful of galleries exhibiting modern art across the whole of the USA with little more than twenty artists of any stature regularly showing work there. By 1986… the USA had over two thousand modern art galleries with around six hundred and eighty of those galleries and one hundred and fifty thousand artists of non-amateur status producing modern works of art located in New York City alone. (Gladston 27)
Similarly in Australia too there has been an increase in the numbers of practicing artists in the latter part of the 20th century and early 21st century. As Peter Anderson points out, one of the major shifts that has occurred in the visual arts over the last few decades has been the increased numbers of artists working from within universities using a “research paradigm.”

For many years the Australia Council’s grant guidelines included a long list of things that they would not fund. They still do, but now the list is a little shorter. While funding is still not generally available for the academic activities of undergraduate and post-graduate students, one of the things that has dropped off the list is the explicit exclusion of “academic research.” This is perhaps a recognition that a good deal of art practice these days functions within a research paradigm, with quite a lot of it going on in and around art schools that are now embedded within the university sector. It’s part of a shift that has been going on for a couple of decades, along with the gradual expansion of research based higher degrees in the visual arts. (Anderson, *Arts Business Practice or Practice Based Research*, 2009)

However, this increase of working or professional artists in Australia doesn’t mean that artists make a living from their art. On the Australia Council website can be found the report, “Do You Really Expect to Get Paid” from 2010, written by David Throsby and Anita Zednik. One of the many interesting and sometimes startling statistics that this report shows is that “the strong growth in artist numbers between 1987 and 2001” has actually “levelled out.” And crucially less than twenty percent of artists work full time on their creative practice. (Throsby and Zednik, 19). These figures begin to show the complicated situation that artists live with. And one of the most well recognized facts is that it is extremely difficult to make a living from an art practice alone. As Throsby and Zednik show in their report, the average income for visual artists from their practice is below $30k per annum. Most Australian artists need to supplement their income with part-time or even fulltime work.

In a 2009 *Art Monthly* article titled “The Numbers Game – On Counting the Arts”, Peter Anderson juggles the contradictory figures reported by The Australian Bureau of Statistics on artist’s numbers. As Anderson explains it is a complicated business with one report announcing that the number of artists had doubled, while another showed that the number had dropped quite considerably. One of the key factors that
muddied the waters was the fact that many artists (at least 60%) work at “other jobs.”
A reason for this confusion, Anderson explains, is that as the census requires that one
list the “main job” as that performed the week of the census, this may be skewing the
figures, occluding the actual number of artists. This is because many artists have an
“other main job” in order to survive, and the census caught them on the “wrong”
week. Significantly, Anderson concludes:

Even if the overall number of artists has not declined, the census does show
that the numbers who identify key artist occupations as their main job have
fallen. This, at the very least, suggests a decline in the proportion of artists
whose practice is their main job... (Anderson, 2009: 36)

This conclusion points directly to how and why the current redundancies will have a
flow-on effect for artists working in ARIs, artists who often work as teachers,
researchers or other roles in public institutions, while maintaining an art practice.
Universities in particular have become a haven for artists through PhD programmes
where practice-based art research has become a well-trodden route for artists to
extend their practice through further study, giving them valuable time and space to
pursue projects and their own practice. Given this matrix of artists and art-related
work through university positions, the network of artists who divide their time
between institutional employment and their art practice has created a unique and
specific arts ecology.

In order to understand the flow-on effect of recent restructuring and redundancies on
artists involved with ARIs and to draw out the complex networks, including the
significant social as well as economic connections that make up the arts ecology in
Australia, in particular Melbourne, I decided to ask artists themselves about their links
to the public sector, in particular the university. Given the constraints of time and
space I will present four quite different ARIs, three based in Melbourne and one
located in Sydney.

The Rumpus Room is an independent space run by artist Ashlee Laing from his home
garage in Maribyrnong. It emphasizes play and process, rather than finished
outcomes or fully resolved work, and the space has the look and feel of a project
space rather than a white cube. It is open one Saturday a month for 8 months of the
year “and offers visual and performance artists a space in which to simply come and
As Ashlee welcomes artists to ‘have a romp’ in his garage, the experience for both artists and audience can be unexpected and open-ended. There’s a sense of both intimacy and intensity to the projects, with the garage shifting and changing with each new artist residency. I’ve seen and experienced some impressive projects here over the past year including intense and moving performances, compelling images and sophisticated engagements with complex ideas. The Saturday night crowd creates a warm, sociable and charged atmosphere to the events, where beer and wine flow generously, accompanied by a backyard barbeque, and often followed by a performance.

In an email discussion with Ashlee he described his own institutional ties. He started The Rumpus Room while doing his Masters at VCA, he felt that he and fellow students needed a space to try things out and get feedback - “we needed more from each other than what was on offer at the uni” and he felt that the existing ARIs were too expensive, and “really just a third wheel in the real estate game.” Ashlee also wrote that, “everyone that has shown and/or written responses to shows in The Rumpus Room are an associate (student) of 1 of the 4 schools I have been affiliated with: SCA, Tas. School of Art, La Trobe Uni (Bendigo) and VCA.” For Ashlee, the
universities have offered connections and opportunity to meet like-minded people, rather than any financial help.

In Sydney, Marrickville Garage is run by artists Jane Polkinghorne and Sarah Newall. In December 2012 they turned their neglected garage into an art space. It took them the entire summer to fix it up, including repointing the brickwork, and cleaning up the outside toilet. Since then they have had an exhibition event almost every month, both solo and group shows, with a very broad range of artists inhabiting the space with singular and affecting projects. Again, there are no fees for artists who show, and to keep it manageable the Garage is only open the first weekend of every month. Like many ARIs, Marrickville Garage has a well designed and comprehensive website, documenting the many fascinating projects they’ve shown, with photos, links and information. This is a significant aspect for many ARIs – with Marrickville Garage an excellent example – of the way ARIs are creating a broad national and international network and public profile, with a sophisticated online presence, while at the same time creating a dynamic archive. The importance of the social as a significant aspect for most ARIs is also evident with Marrickville Garage where in 2013 and 2014, as part of Marrickville Open Studio Trail, they extended this social generosity to their local neighbourhood by organizing a street art project, where they invited all the houses in their street to donate their front yards as sites for artworks.
In separate email correspondence with Jane and Sarah they described their institutional ties. They are both graduates of Sydney College of the Arts where Jane is currently a candidate in the PhD program. During their candidacy they both received the University Post-Graduate Award. Jane described this as a “crucial part of my income.” Both currently teach casually at different universities. Jane says that both she and Sarah “are reliant on casual teaching for their income.” They both have deep ties to graduates, current students and teachers at Sydney College, and so draw on these connections in forming exhibitions.

The next two spaces are part of Docklands Spaces.¹³
Run by artist Deb Bain-King, *The Front* is one such space, occupying a shop front on the main street of Docklands. It is an art space with a very unique and singular approach, focusing on large-scale installation in the front gallery and participatory and collaborative ideas as well as residencies in the backspace. On the several occasions I’ve visited, I’ve encountered some spectacular projects in the front gallery, which acts as a window gallery, when closed. There’s been a wide range of work shown – often with a deep and sophisticated engagement with social issues as they impact personal stories. Openings are always packed with lots of good nibbles and drinks flowing.

In response to my question about her own affiliations with universities, Deb replied via iPhone, “the most important aspect of education at universities is the opportunity to engage with high-level thinking with a large range of other artists and practitioners and thinkers.” She also said that the artists who have
been involved in *The Front* have come from RMIT, Monash, VCA and VU, and she met them through ARI networks as well as at tutorials at university. Similar to Ashlee’s experience she thinks that universities offer connections and opportunities to meet like-minded people, rather than any financial help.

The final space I’ll discuss is *D11@ Docklands* which is also part of *Docklands Spaces* and located across the road from *The Front*. It is run by *Second Collective* a group of very energetic and enthusiastic artists. The gallery consists of two large spaces and has an amazing range of solo and group shows – every two weeks – an incredible schedule. Opening nights usually attract a large crowd and there’s usually a provocative performance event as well as plenty of good food and drinks. I recently interviewed artist Michael Carolan, the founding director, and one of the main initiators of the project. He emphasized the gallery’s diversity and its commitment to collaborations between artists. In terms of public institutional connections, Michael and many of the artists associated with the gallery have ties with RMIT, either as current students or post-grads or recent graduates. Himself, a graduate, Michael was awarded an RMIT Art Link grant for a previous ARI, called Coalesce ARI.
The sociability of ARIs is prevalent with these Docklands Spaces as they work together to maximize their audiences. The Front, D11, as well as The Food Court nearby, usually hold their openings on the same evening, thus increasing audience traffic between the galleries, and creating a unique arts precinct through camaraderie and cooperation.

To conclude. As the artists interviewed above suggest, the links between artists and public sector institutions are various, complex and sometimes indirect. Nevertheless, there is a definite connection between ARI artists and educational institutions, where artists are entangled through work, education or simply networks of colleagues and community. With the severe cuts to public sector institutions, in particular universities, it seems inevitable that artists involved with ARIs will be affected,
although it is impossible to say what it will mean ultimately for the ARIs themselves, when the dust settles. Surviving current austerity measures which cut back not only direct funding to arts institutions, but other less obvious support networks like universities and public sector educational institutions, will inevitably be at a great cost to individual artists, the arts ecology and the larger cultural economy, and the public sector as a whole will be impoverished.
End Notes

1. For overview of neoliberal hegemony in Australia and its effects on everyday life, see Cahill 2007. For a more specific discussion of restructure in the Australian university system and its adverse effect on equal opportunity for women see Lafferty and Fleming 2000. For further discussion on the effects of restructure on universities internationally see Ward 2014.


3. For an incisive discussion on the issues facing today’s art schools and art education, in particular in Australia, see Buckley and Conomos, 2009. For an in-depth study of practice-based research see Barrett and Bolt 2007. “The emergence of the discipline of practice-led research highlights the crucial interrelationship that exists between theory and practice and the relevance of theoretical and philosophical paradigms for the contemporary arts practitioner.” Estelle Barrett, Introduction.

4. For a comprehensive discussion of terminology and history of Australian artist-run initiatives, with a focus on Sydney, see Griffiths 2012.

5. 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.’” In their opening essay, Jeff Khonsary and Kristina Lee Podesva draw upon Portuguese anthropologist João de Pina-Cabral to re-imagine the term institution, a once much maligned idea that avant-garde artists, and in particular those associated with alternative spaces, sought to resist. “Thus, by institution, he refers not to a staid organization or structure, but a process of shared intentionality carried out by persons, who being mutually constituted are in the process of becoming singular persons.” (16-17)

6. Since 2008 the Australia Council for the Arts has funded ARIs through the New Works category, with funding tied to specific projects, rather than directly funding actual running costs. Recently, 2015, the Australia Council announced a new funding model with ARIs now funded through the ‘arts projects for organizations grant. For more info on OzCo grants see, http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/funding/new-grants-model/


9. For more on The Rumpus Room see: https://www.facebook.com/rumpusgarage
10. For further discussion on the relationship between the gift and art see Lewis Hyde 2007. In his classic book on the ‘gift’ and “gift economy”, Hyde argues for the importance of the ‘gift economy’ for the arts and creativity, and the difficulty for the artist or poet to reconcile and make a space for ‘making’ and ‘inspiration’ within a market-driven culture.

11. Sydney College of the Arts (SCA), Tasmanian School of Art (Tas. School of Art), La Trobe University, Bendigo Victoria (La Trobe Uni) and Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne (VCA)

12. For more on Marrickville Garage see: http://marrickvillegarage.com/
Marrickville Open Studio Trail is an initiative of Marrickville Council: see http://www.marrickville.nsw.gov.au/most/

13. Docklands Spaces is commissioned by the City of Melbourne, MAB Corporation, and Places Victoria. Docklands Spaces is a pilot initiative by Renew Australia to activate some of the currently under-utilized spaces in Docklands through incubating short-term uses by creative enterprises and independent local initiatives on a rent-free basis. For more information on this project see: http://docklandsspaces.org

14. For more on The Front see: https://www.facebook.com/TheFront424

15. For more on D11@Docklands see: http://d11artists.wix.com/d11-ari
Works Cited


