

Understanding Artist-run Initiatives and Place

A short introduction to my research:

Over the past three years I've been researching artist-run initiatives across Australia. My research is part of a creative arts project and my method is one of engagement and encounters where I'm collecting stories and artefacts and asking artists themselves about their experiences of working and showing in ARIs.

The questions that took me into the field were: 1. what role do ARIs play in artists' lives and do they shape or affect practices, and if so how? And 2. what are the social and cultural implications for making art in this sector? As a practicing artist the starting point for the research is my own involvement and reliance on artist-run initiatives. I consider them very important spaces: to show work, to meet other artists, and to continue engaging in questions around art practice and philosophies of art. I have also come to understand them not simply as spaces of exhibition – they can also be understood as important public institutions in what the political scientist Bonnie Honig calls “holding environments”. Honig uses this term to argue for the importance of public things for a healthy democracy. I think artist-run initiatives play this role too. They are ‘holding environments’ where they make space for a range of activities and events that activate and sustain artists' lives, shape discourses and gather diverse publics. In sum they are cultural hubs – humming, active and crucial.

Today I want to share with you some thoughts about artist-run initiatives and place. When I began thinking about ARIs and place I found myself thinking of place in two different ways. The first is the use of space by contemporary ARIs. The second way I want to think about ARIs and place is through the call of the local. This call has been described as “radical localism” by Chris Kraus in her short but vivid essay, *Kelly Lake Store & Other Stories*. When I began my research it was thought that physical space and other things like actual books would disappear. We'll soon have paperless offices and everything will be virtual. No need for Real Life space. Art will go online, I was told many times. But this has not been my experience – even though many spaces are experimenting with online presence, the physical space of the gallery has maintained its allure and artists continue to support its

endless creation. This continuing support speaks to the importance of place, to being situated and to the force of material presence for artists - and their needs and desires to create communities and social spaces of reflection, contemplation, conversation, interaction and just hanging out. Yet the sort of spaces/places that ARIs occupy today are significantly different to the traditional white cube – where art was imagined as timeless and placeless. There are of course still many ARIs that inhabit a white space, but even then, the space is not a sealed off white cube, but porous and leaky, with artists making connections beyond the space itself.

In September this year, for instance, Blindsight, an ARI in inner city Melbourne presented *On the Verge*, a Blindsight Festival. It was the third iteration of the Festival and was billed as “an experimental art festival of chance encounters, immersive soundscapes and intimate creative exchanges. For 11 days art will materialize in the alleyways and byways of Melbourne’s CBD. New works and site-responsive performances will disrupt, alter and transform the spaces we take for granted.”

As a member of the audience I took the lift up to the seventh floor where Blindsight is located and collected my bright pink package of maps and stuff. The gallery itself staged parts of the Festival, but mostly it acted as headquarters for the Festival, which occurred 7 stories below at multiple places around the local streets and alleyways. This use of the gallery as headquarters or command post, with the artwork elsewhere figures the gallery as not only porous and leaky, but shifts its modus operandi. The space of the gallery is now a meeting space, a place for decision-making, map-making, a node in a larger movement of activity that draws our attention to the everyday world outside, the marvelous world we live in.

Brisbane is unique in the way artists are setting up ARIs in singular and unusual places. I find this tradition astonishing. Of course there is a long tradition elsewhere of apartment galleries or using one’s own house, garage etc, but in Brisbane my expectations have been turned upside-down with not only the sheer number of out-of-the-way and temporary ARIs but also strength of the tradition – it seems to me unique and distinctive.

In writing of the importance of public institutions for a healthy democracy, the political theorist Bonnie Honig borrows the term “holding environment” from British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, to argue for the importance of public things for a ‘healthy’ democracy.

Public things are, we might say...part of democracy’s ‘holding environment.’ Efficiency is one value in a democracy but it is not democracy’s only or regnant value, at least not for democracies that are, as Winnicott might say, ‘in health.’ In health, democracy is rooted in common love for and contestation of public things. Without such things, citizenship in neoliberal democracies risks being reduced to repetitive (private) work...and exceptional public emergencies. (Honig 2013: 59-60)

Honig argues that public things, including institutions, play a vital role in keeping democratic practices alive and healthy. Reading Winnicott’s ideas in dialogue with new materialist thinking and “recent work in thing theory”, she outlines a powerful argument for the vitality of objects and their significance to human world-making, providing us with stability and form. According to Honig the value of public things does not lie with efficiency, profit or other instrumental values, rather their use value is a human one, which values relations between people and things.

If ARIs are imagined as a public institution – and given the long history of ARIs in Australia where they have become a well recognized and highly significant part of the arts landscape and ecology - I would argue, they *are* public institutions. What would it mean to imagine artist spaces as ‘things’ or assemblages of things, rather than sets of relations, or a space of discourse or a timeless placeless space for precious objects? And what does this mean for contemporary ARI spaces like garages, apartments, Under a Queenslander, living rooms and on the back of a truck etc.. All these places complicate the idea of public and institution. Are they public spaces in private places? Or private spaces staging public events? And how can something as short lived and transitory as an ARI be an institution? These are questions we may return to later tonight.

Place involves labour and care. For ARIs this means unpaid work through volunteering. There are many opinions about this situation. For some it’s bad, exploitative and plays into the hands of what the current neoliberal world order wants: working for nothing. Yet for many people the freedom and labor of love that creates local ARIs is something to be prized and protected. As a labor of passion and commitment it is felt that there is a real danger

that this can be killed off when funding demands or rulebooks enter the picture – or it simply becomes another job. Madeleine Stack, in a Runway Conversation blog for the Ecologies issue, describes “household” ARIs that she’s experienced in Brisbane in the past, in particular Witchmeat, as places that generated powerful ideas and huge amounts of anarchic energy. Now living in New York and London she remembers wistfully that the sort of ARI that exists in the Australian context, “don’t exist in the same way,” over there. Most of the ARI bloggers in that issue shared the same feeling, which was that ARIs are necessarily momentary, transient – “an opening of space with no future goals towards achieving institutional permanence.” They were considered spaces that allowed strange and unusual things possible before disappearing to be replaced by another. And according to the bloggers this is the way it should be – as Lucy Hawthorne writing from Tasmania states, “..unlike large public institutions, ARIs should be celebrated for their temporary nature, their flexibility, riskiness and inability to find a treasurer.”

The question of ARIs and longevity and the accompanying danger of ‘professionalisation’ is tricky and full of potholes. In 2014 I attended an ARI conference in Copenhagen. During the conference a Canadian curator gave a presentation on the artist-run scene in Canada, and I was surprised and a little saddened to hear that no artists actually work in artist-run centres anymore. They have become very professional and employ mainly curators and non-artist staff. Maybe Madeleine Stack and Lucy Hawthorne have a point – “an artist-run initiative allows for a carving out of space that is designed to end, a ritual break where people come together before participating in collective dismantling once the gathering has served its purpose.” Yet, yet... I also think there’s something to be said for small organisations operating on a shoestring budget that may grow and get a bit polished and learn stuff. There’s a wealth of knowledge in experience too.

2. The call of the local

In 2012 Chris Kraus published *Kelly Lake Store & Other Stories*. It is a compelling read – a work of multiple stories that point to the lop-sided reality of living in our globalized market-driven world. In it Kraus dwells upon border towns, and forgotten places evacuated of people as giant monopoly supermarkets drain the life from smaller operations like the eponymous Kelly Lake Store in Minnesota. It seems today, global monopoly capital shifts

capital and goods at lightening speed and demands total freedom through scandalous trade deals like the TPP, yet, real people – like immigrants and refugees are stopped at the border. In Kraus’s stories Kelly Lake Store exists on the same plane as Mexicali Rose an artist-run space in the notorious border town of Mexicali – on the Mexican side of the US/Mexican border. Against the grain of contemporary artists’ constant traversing of the globe, and the magnetic pull to traditional art world centers, Kraus describes the artists of Mexicali Rose as practicing a “radical localism” – “privileging authentic relationships and shared experience over the dislocation and competition of the international art world.” P.38 For the artists of Mexicali, Mexicali Rose has created “an opportunity to remain in one’s own community and assert an alternative ethos.”

And this is one of the major strengths of artist-run spaces a – where other larger public institutions play host to international and blockbuster exhibitions it is ARIs that have traditionally supported and nurtured local artists and culture – by acting as “holding environments”.

In drawing together such seemingly different activities like a country store and an artist space, Kraus’s argument may at first be mistaken to mean these are both ‘shops’ or places for selling products. This would be a mistake. Kraus’s argument is subtle, and is not about products or commercialization. It’s about how each place gathers and nurtures local communities, sustaining relations through their specific operations; the general store through everyday supplies; the art space, Mexicali Rose, through a grounded space of relations. What they both share is their smallness and locatedness – and they both exist in overlooked places, at some distance from the philosophical place called maximizing your profit margin. “Mexicali people do not need to believe that they are the center of the universe...” Writes Mexicali writer and critic Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz. Indeed as Kraus writes, “In Spanish, the word “culture” connotes not just high art, but a person’s entire background and knowledge. Using the terms “art, video, and culture’ ... reflects the fact that the work of these artists...is inextricably linked to the city’s geography, history, and politics signaling the intangible value of culture beyond any one cultural product.” (Kraus, 24) Kraus’s argument for the importance of the local is not a call to return to parochial, small world ties. Its suggestive text weaves a more complex argument about art as culture, raising the question

of where art belongs. And that place, Kraus implies, is firmly where artists live and work and where art's use value is centered on the processes of making and making meaning, for artists and communities. And just for the record Mexicali Rose has been going since 2007.

Another globalization

In a paper titled "The Responsibilities of Place" Doreen Massey, a British geographer makes the point that 'globalisation' is a general term for global interconnectedness and she suggests that former imperialist and colonial forms of globalization may be quite different from the present, neoliberal one. She goes on to write:

The reason for emphasizing [this], (the difference between colonial globalization and neo-liberal) is to hold open the possibility, the political aim, that yet another form of globalization might be created – one which might be, or which could aim toward being more egalitarian, mutually respectful and democratic. (Massey, 98)

In other words it's important to imagine that "another globalisation is possible." Massey is keen to emphasize the aim is not to oppose local and global, she writes, "for not only does that persistently lead to suspect kinds of localisms – nationalisms, exclusivist parochialisms, racism – but also it is simply impractical... the local can never be walled off from the global." And this is true for artworld relations too, as artist spaces are grounded in a local place, yet they are not walled off or walled in. On the whole artist spaces that I've visited in Australia strive to make connections with both local and global collaborations and partners. Following Chris Kraus's suggestive text, that to imagine 'another fairer and more democratic globalization we need to first respect and pay attention to the local, because in the end we all live in a local place, somewhere.

The Future of ARIs and arts culture.

We live in interesting times - an ancient Chinese curse. Which makes it difficult to imagine what will happen next. Australian arts cultures have been relatively well supported by previous governments more or less, since Paul Keating announced Creative Nation in 1994. However the present Turnbull government is rolling back support for the Arts sector at a rapid rate. Mark Dreyfus from the Labor Party estimates that \$300 million has been cut from federal cultural funding by the Coalition, and it doesn't stop there. In a recent essay

for Platform Papers Justin O'Connor writes ominously – “The creative industries have no place in Turnbull’s vision...Innovation would be driven by investment in, and commercialization of, the so-called STEM disciplines – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. And he warns “Art and culture are under immense threat...Our system of collective and individual meaning-making has been given over to a market-machine for the capture of ‘profit without production’ whose dominating logic is financialisation and the battery of digitized metrics that goes along with it. We are engaged in an immense experiment to see if the act of monetary exchange can found not just a dynamic economy but the very basis of social existence and individual fulfilment. It is as crazy as Pol Pot’s Year Zero or Mao’s Cultural Revolution.”

The future of arts cultures may depend on the clever ways that ARIs have always dealt with lack of funding and opportunity. But will that be enough?