

From the Ground Up: artist-run initiatives and place

For over 4 years I've been researching the cultural economy of artist-run initiatives in Australia. The project is part of my creative arts practice and focuses on artist's experiences of being involved in ARI spaces. One of the pleasures of my research was the privilege of visiting all sorts of artist spaces across the country, including Aboriginal Art Centres in Arnhem Land and outside Alice Springs and regional art spaces.

In May this year, as a culmination of my four years research I collaborated with curator Anabelle Lacroix to hold an exhibition and symposium titled "an Act of Showing: rethinking Artist-Run Initiatives Through Place," at Testing Grounds in Melbourne. The exhibition invited over 22 artist-run initiatives across Australia to participate in the event. We later broadened this to include two artist spaces from the Asia-Pacific region – Ruangi MES 56 and OCAC from Taipei, Taiwan. We invited each space as a group or collective, asking that they decide how to respond. The invitation was for them to reflect on the idea of *place* for their ARIs: how does place matter? and to send us a piece of artwork that would express their ARIs relations with place. The artwork could comprise anything that could be sent through the post, or email – video, painting, sound, instructions or performance. The theme of the exhibition was inspired by the writer Chris Kraus's short text *Kelly Lake Store and Other Stories*, where she tells the story of Mexicali Rose, an artist space on the US-Mexican border. Kraus writes compellingly of the dilemmas of globalization and the growing inequality that the current form of globalized capital is creating. For Kraus, its seems redemption can be found in out-of-the way places that refuse the global forces of capital. This emphasis on the local places of art-making resonated powerfully with us and our understanding of how ARIs are grounded and emerge from local forces in specific places. For Kraus and for us "place" and where you are in the world, matter. In the context of our constant connection through the internet, it can seem as if actual, physical and material place has diminished in importance. The proposition of the exhibition, on the contrary, was that physical, material place is still of the greatest importance. It still matters, even if the ways that it matters are contested and varied. The project recognized that one of the strengths of artist-run initiatives is their appearance and presence in a specific location or place.

However, in this paper I'd like to turn to another way of thinking about place and the specific places of ARIs through recent theories of affect and non-representational theory. With the New Materialist turn scholars and others have begun attending to the more-than-human world of objects and non-human animals and to what Jane Bennett has referred to as "vibrant matter" and "thing-power". This profoundly de-centring scholarship understands the world as not primarily controlled by humans. Humans are not the centre or subject of the world. Rather humans are understood as part of assemblages or networks of movement, forces and activities. In this understanding of the world, the spaces and places of ARIs can be apprehended through a shift of emphasis – a shift in figure/ground so to speak where the background objects, such as the air or something as intangible as the atmosphere is now actually tangible. And this is no more apparent than in recent theories of atmosphere. In her PhD thesis, (unpublished) *Vibrant Compositions: Atmospheres of Creativity in Sydney, Australia*, Alyssa Critchley gives a compelling account of informal creative spaces in Sydney through attending and attuning to their atmospheres and what she calls the "vibe" that make up the spaces and which in fact enable these spaces to create the specific subcultural production that flourished between 2005 -2015. Drawing on non-representational theory attributed to Nigel Thrift and his students as well as new materialist thinkers such as Jane Bennett, Critchley shifts our thinking of creative spaces, like artist-run spaces, to a greater consideration of their material presence, she writes "This conceptual framework gives objects their due. Importantly, it articulates why informal creative spaces have been more than simply four walls to perform within..." (25)

In the texts of cultural studies scholar Kathleen Stewart, similarly to the non-representational theory of geographers like Nigel Thrift, the idea of place expands and contracts as these writers turn their attention to atmosphere, affect, attunements and the more-than human assemblages that act upon humans. In a series of texts on affect and precarity Kathleen Stewart opens up a world of writing that is attuned to the granular and to the potential of body or bodies and experience, by attending to their atmospheres ... to the 'little scenes of recognition' and 'sensory matters' that 'compose place'. In a text titled 'Precarity's Forms' she writes,

I come from a place where the seasons are magnetized to tones of voice and a quality of light. The winter is a dark tunnel. October is saturated in color. The air is

bitable. In May, it swells.

At random, transient moments, a sense of being-from-here happens in a look exchanged, a town accent—a sheer recognition of a sheer recognition. These little scenes of recognition, and these sensory matters, compose place. They do not symbolize or represent it. Rather, they are its always emergent forms—precise actualizations of a field of potentiality. From the perspective of acts of place and its sensory materiality, place is something that throws itself together in moments, things, in aesthetic sensibilities and affective charges. (Stewart, 519)

In reading Kathleen Stewart one is pulled and pushed along, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes with great elation. Inspired by Stewart and Critchley, in this paper I want to share with you stories, shifts and insights as I begin thinking about ARIs and place through the prism of affects, attunements and atmosphere.

First, a few words about atmosphere: In a paper titled “Atmospheric Methods” Ben Anderson and James Ash write that “atmospheres appear to exemplify a non-representational object of inquiry: they are part of the ‘ubiquitous backdrop’ of life and thought, while at the same time exerting some kind of force...(35). Yet, they write, atmospheres are irreducible phenomena: neither wholly separate from the relations that form them, nor wholly determined by those relations” (42). They go on to warn that any “attempt to separate out the assembling of atmospheres in effects and determinants is likely to fall short precisely because atmospheres envelop: they infuse and mix with other elements” (43). Similarly, Stewart writes,

An atmosphere is not an inert context but a force field in which people find themselves. It is not an effect of other forces but a lived affect -- a capacity to affect and to be affected that pushes a present into a composition, an expressivity, the sense of potentiality and event. It is an attunement of the senses, of labors, and imaginaries to potential ways of living in or living through things.... Attending to atmospheric attunements and trying to figure their significance incites forms of writing and critique that detour into descriptive eddies and attach to trajectories. This is writing and theorizing that tries to stick with something becoming atmospheric, to itself resonate or tweak the force of material-sensory somethings forming up. (Stewart 2011:452)

What these ideas demonstrate is the irreducibility of place. As philosopher of place Jeff Malpas argues: the significance of place is not to be found in our experience *of* places so much as in the grounding of experience *in* place. For Malpas, place is not a contingent

feature of human existence, but derives from the very nature of human thought, experience and identity as established in and through place. Indeed, he proposes that we can only understand human thought and experience through understanding place – an understanding through *where* we are – from the ground up.

Inspired by this form of writing, which writes through theory and the senses together and in a sense performs a theory of atmospheres, I will relate three separate stories of ARIs I have known, all of which are in Melbourne where I live. Living in Melbourne gave me a chance to experience these ARIs differently to those ARIs across Australia that I visited – usually only once. Living in Melbourne meant that I could become part of the scene, an active member of the audience for openings and also as an exhibiting artist. As I was involved in these ARIs my relationship with the spaces, the people and the events was qualitatively different to that of meeting artists elsewhere and visiting spaces only once. Following Stewart’s own method of attuning to things and places through stories and attuning to not only the relationships between people but equally the feel and sense of the places, I hope to offer some insights into the worlds and ‘worlding’ that make up these ARIs. Each story speaks to a specific quality or something that gives that ARI a special feel or as Critchley so vividly describes, “a vibe.”

Rumpus Room



Figure 1 Rumpus Room Garage door with sign

The Rumpus Room was a garage space in Melbourne operating between 2013-2015. It's long since gone. But four years ago, in the early stages of my research I decided to drive out to see this legendary space myself. Rumpus Room was not an inner city space, but a suburban garage in Maribynong, a suburb in the inner-west of Melbourne. After driving along one of the main arterial roads for a long time, following the tram and my iPhone Google map I was instructed to turn left. I turned off into narrow suburban streets full of cars crammed along both sides of the road. It took a while to locate the exact house. All the houses in the street were red or yellow brick and probably built in the mid-to-late 60s or the '70s. Walking up the drive I noticed a small colourful sign on a side door next to the roller-door garage. It said Rumpus Room. There was no indication of life. Like most houses in Australia, life is lived out the back. The front of the house is a shut-up blank face. I opened the door and the noise of people and dogs and music hit my ears. The smell of smoke engulfed me. I hesitated. This was a private home could I walk through someone's garage... the artwork lay on the garage floor. The garage was a garage, dusty and dimly lit. it still felt like a garage. The video artwork played across the dusty air, with grainy images flickering. It was hard to make out the images. They bounced back and forth against a glass prism on the floor. It was unclear if I should stop and spend time with the work or walk through. I was unsure of the protocol for visiting garage ARIs. I walked out to the backyard, the sounds and smells intensifying and now I could see lots of people. A crowd of people gathered around an open makeshift fire that wafted huge swirls of smoke. Choking, I noticed the barbeque sausages, the beer, the white bread, the tomato sauce, the white embroidered tablecloth – suburban rewind, I thought there might be chooks in the back. The backyard was huge. I later found out that there had been chooks, but they had died or been killed by feral foxes. The party occupied only a tiny part of the yard. The smoke smelt bitter, acrid. No-one noticed. Melbourne is cold in winter and open fires, and indoor fireplaces are popular and frequent and hugely loved. Coming from Sydney, warm, and subtropical where heaters are one mean small bar shoved against the wall, winter in Melbourne was a revelation full of fire and smoke. Rumpus Room was run by artist Ashlee Laing, a very large person with flaming red hair and a warm laugh. He wanted to know who I was. The Rumpus Room is word of mouth, so it fits somewhere between an open-to-the-public space and a private party. Properly speaking it's open to people who know people. I didn't know anyone, or so I thought. But then out of the smoky shadows several people yelled my name. So it turned

out I did know someone. Ashlee ran the space as an artist residency – residencies were by invitation. And artists were given the space and the time for free. It was a gift. On this particular night people sat around on old lightweight chairs and worn-out couches and makeshift seating. The night was cold and flames from the fire felt warm and even cosy. People moved in and out of the house and pooled around the kitchen bench waiting for special drinks to be served. Conversations moved across groups, as people clumped together, then moved outside to stand or sit around the fire. A sense of afternoon barbeques from suburban childhoods, filled with voices, music playing somewhere inside the house and smoky air filled with chatter and laughter. Within a year of my first visit, Ashlee and his partner Shane had to vacate. The house became surrounded by developments on all sides. It was like living in the middle of a building site. A very Melbourne story.

Trocadero

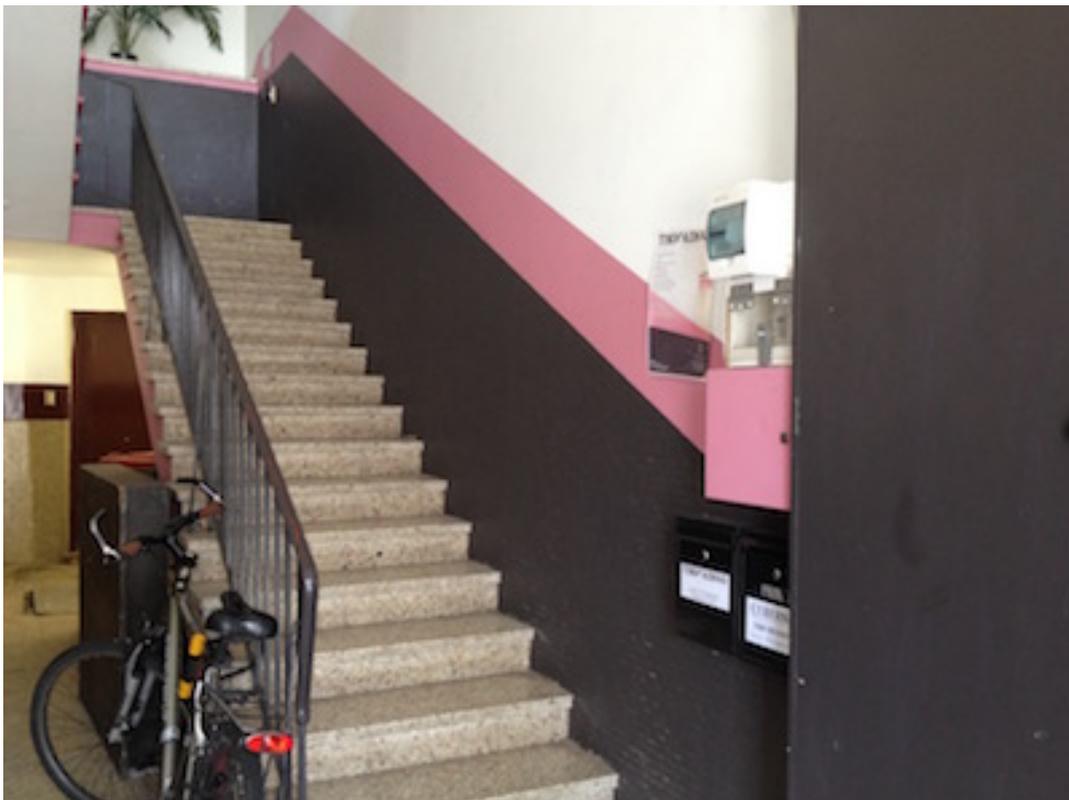


Figure 2 The front staircase to Trocadero

Trocadero is a space with an unusually long history – for an ARI. It celebrated its twelfth year this year, 2017. Trocadero is in Footscray, on the traditional lands of the Kulin nation. Footscray has a legendary status for Melburnians. It has traditionally been a working class

suburb, and the original centre of industrial production for Australia, since the 19th century when Melbourne was the capital. Since the 1950s Footscray has welcomed successive waves of migration. The most recent being East Africans who now live beside the older Vietnamese community. Walking from Footscray railway station to Trocadero I pass Vietnamese street food cafes and restaurants, smelling the aromas of basil and cooked spices sitting next to African cafes, and men wearing bright and startlingly colourful clothing. Trocadero itself is located on the site of an old Theatre, and in true ARI tradition of honouring the original uses of the site or buildings they occupy, the name has stuck. The original Trocadero theatre was one of three art deco theatres in Footscray now demolished. To get to Trocadero you climb terrazzo tile stairs up from the main street to the first floor. Trocadero has two spaces, and both spaces have no windows. The feeling in these spaces is stuffy, airless and claustrophobic...especially in summer. But more than any other space I've visited in Melbourne Trocadero has a welcoming feel. It's a space that is congenial to conversations and encounters with strangers. Maybe because its Footscray, maybe because the spaces spread out along the corridor and now take up most of the first floor, giving people room to sit and linger. The corridor at Trocadero is full of stuff. Notice boards fill one wall and the corridor has a sharp turn to the left and then right as you head down to Five Walls – a space dedicated to non-objective art forms. This dog-leg turn in the building creates a sense of movement and surprise and still feels like offices filled with vitamin D deprived accountants and shady financial advisors full of synthetic materials discharging static electricity along with their advice. During openings people always gather on the landing and along the corridor. There's always a bar at the top of the stairs selling beer and cold drinks. There's also a tiny shelf space above the bend in the stairs, called the Nooky, where performances happen regularly. To walk down the corridor is to encounter artworks in every ex-office space. On opening night there is an excess of art as people travel up and down the corridors, collecting in doorways and spreading out thinly in other sections. Because there are no windows in any of the spaces the rooms are lit with a fluorescent glow. The light is intensely white and bright reflecting back an image of the photographer trying to capture the pictures in their glass frames. Documenting shows becomes a self portrait of shadows. The Trocadero building has no beaux arts charm, it has the graceless feel of suburban bland. But like the return of Brutalism as a valid aesthetic, the once bland

graceless arcade is beginning to age and ripen, its old cracked walls beginning to muster some character and even some charm. Gentrification is creeping up the stairs.

Blindside



Figure 3 Susan Hawkins, July 2016, Blindside.

On the seventh floor of the Nicholas Building in Melbourne one can find Blindsight ARI. Most people take the wobbly lifts up to the seventh floor. The lifts had a cosmetic remake several years ago disguising their ancient wheezy mechanism, which is revealed often as they break down and you're left stranded in their tiny airless cabin, waiting for the fixer-upper to arrive: I'm 30 kilometres away, he screams through the emergency phone, as you scream back "I'm claustrophobic" and he mumbles "sorry, I'm driving as fast as I can." On the seventh floor you find yourself in an old beaux arts corridor with a central shaft ...it's a hole in the building, with offices and spaces arranged around it. And it's reminiscent of early skyscraper buildings from Chicago or New York where everything was made of glass and iron. You can walk around the corridor and circle the floor, looking down into messy and intriguing spaces with internal windows looking out into the central well. The building is full of creatives and makers. Entering Blindsight through a stylish modernist door you find two domestic-sized rooms. It's hard to say what these rooms may have once held. Or what these rooms could now say. The walls are painted off-white with paint laid down roughly as artists hide each art irruption behind another layer of off-off white paint. The walls are a palimpsest of artwork. If you could peel the paint layer by layer you would find an art archive. In the first and larger room two windows face across the city. These windows have a legendary status. They frame a spectacular urban view looking down at the city towards the most famous and iconic places, Flinders St Station and Federation Square, and beyond to the Yarra River and parklands. Artists showing in this room are all too aware of the powerful competitive force the windows hold. Both day and night the view is magnetic and the closer you move towards it the louder the accompanying sounds of nearby air-conditioning units creating a symphony of noise. Artists, understanding this force-field too well often try to work *with* it rather than sealing it up or closing it off. One artist held a microphone outside to amplify the noise, another created a giant set of headphones allowing the viewer to stand close to the windows and to soak up the view while listening to their sounds. The view may be legendary, but it also feels precarious. If you look up at the Nicholas Building from Fed square, as I did one day, you'll see a bland concrete wall with simple functionary windows. This is the unglamorous side wall of the ornate art deco building, where, due to dumb luck or good building regulations a whole city block continues to sit beside the Nicholas Building as low rise – thus allowing for the unique wall of windows

to enjoy their view, for the birds their perch, and the aircons their noise. Yet it feels precarious.

In Conclusion:

To pay attention to the forces and feel of the material world, literally, by attuning to things, spaces and atmospheres, as I have tried to do in these short descriptions of three ARIs in Melbourne, changes how one understands place. In this understanding of place, the local becomes more than an abstract idea or simply in opposition to the global. It is understanding place in a different register to this binary opposition. It makes place material, composed, emergent, forceful and immanent. And this is what could truly be called understanding place from the ground up.

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