

brisbanedialogues

Jacina Leong

Accidentally Annie Street Space

The directors of this recently conceived Brisbane-based artist-run initiative talk about the current state of alternative projects spaces in this northern capital.

Jacina Leong Brett Jones, co-founder of West Space, Melbourne, suggests that artist run spaces *"have become totally normalized and part of the art mainstream, so that their presence isn't economic anymore, it's the sense of community, the sense of place, the engagement of ideas and sustained work, which doesn't happen in a lot of other places for artists"*(1). What role do artist-run spaces play within the art community in Brisbane?

Steven Russell I definitely think it (artist-run spaces) is about community, sense of place and engagement. (But) I think that might be more relevant, what he (Jones) is saying, to places like Melbourne and Sydney where ARIs (artist-run initiatives) have a much higher profile than here. Because I don't think ARIs are very

much on the radar at all in Brisbane.

Erika Scott Most people don't know what you're talking about when you mention you have (exhibit) art in your house.

(Laughs).

SR Like outside of our (collaboration with) ARIs and (outside of) university, even within the art community, it's kind of like ARIs are inconsequential almost ...

Louise Bennett Well, I don't know much about the Melbourne (ARI) scene but it could go the other way. That there are so many people interested. Maybe there are hundreds of ARIs? Just so many no one is in focus (about what is happening in each ARI).

Elizabeth Willing Maybe if there is too many you don't get that sense of community?

Yeah ...

SR Probably each one ... an ARI comes pre-packaged with that community or grass roots kind of thing. Doesn't it?

EW Within itself?

SR Yeah, within itself. Within its own sphere. You can't escape that with an ARI surely?

EW But wouldn't you say there are different types of communities of ARIs? Even here within Brisbane?

SR Oh, yeah definitely. There is. But what I'm saying is that each ARI has its own sphere of community. And I don't think that you can normalize that. I don't think an ARI can exist without that, really. Because you're removing profit, first of all, and you're removing the institution, second of all. So what's there? It's the people. What's there is the art and the people who want to drive it (the ARI).

SR Maybe we should go to our motivations for setting up this ARI, or setting up an ARI. Is it purely because we don't have any other spaces to show in? Or is it because of community?

ES I think it's from seeing how good other people's work is ...

SR And wanting to show it?

ES And wanting to see it in a space with other interesting work.

LB I think it's like there is no space for us. I don't mean a physical space, a gallery space. There isn't really a place for us in the world ...

(Laughs.)

LB No, I'm being serious. There isn't really a place for us in, I suppose, an industry, or ... in Brisbane. So we have to create our own place ...

ES To make our own rules and construct our own space ... rather than fit into other conventions.

SR So then is an ARI just for young and emerging artists? So if you get your (commercial) gallery deal, you just leave it?

LB Is this just a stepping-stone for something else?

EW You kind of brought up an interesting idea that it's (artist-run spaces) there temporarily. It's there while we need it.

SR So is there ever any development in an ARI? Is it just this stepping-stone?

ES Or maybe it's to set a standard for other ARIs?

LB Well, I think we just see what happens.

ES I think it's hard to continue in an ARI. You have people move on and it's hard to keep together and keep under a certain name. And people have their own ideas of how it should be run. It's an idea at the time and as an idea changes you come up with something else.

LB You either keep going or you go somewhere else. Or you go somewhere else together.

SR So are they just a snapshot of an idea?

EW And a time ... So maybe it's not such a bad idea that they're so temporal. Maybe that's quite good.

SR But that's problematic, then, if they're so temporal, because then you have a lack of development. You know? If something is only here for a short time ... imagine your idea if your ARI became established ... you know and still maintained its core idea.

LB But even if it is temporal it might manifest in a different way and then that's a development.

EW That's probably where writing and documentation comes into these things. Where you learn from the people who have come before you.

LB So are we getting out of this discussion that it's kind of about the temporality of ARIs?

SR It's definitely there.

LB Something that we're all questioning.

EW Maybe they get stale. Maybe that depends on the people running them. Maybe that depends on where they are. Maybe because of the need for a permanent space you start thinking about money ...

SR So let's just direct this (question) directly then. What role do artist-run spaces play within the art community?

LB Well, as I said, a place for people like us, who don't know what to do with themselves. So we just stick together and create and produce and display together.

ES I mean we make more contacts throughout Brisbane by constantly searching for other artists ...

LB So it initiates ...

ES It initiates ...

LB Networking ...

EW And critique and ... it's not just for artists ...

SR It's a learning kind of thing, as well. You learn through it.

EW (ARIs are) for artists, writers and curators.

SR A learning tool.

LB Collaboration. I really like that it initiates networking.

ES Because you're pretty (much on) your own at university ...

LB And imagine (leaving) university ...

ES And trying to network on your own.

LB So strength in numbers.

JL What is your relation to other artist-run spaces in Brisbane? Is it fair to put forward that you have a correspondence or shared ethos with some spaces more than with others?

LB Is it fair?

SR I think it's very fair. It's something that I've noticed, that you get caught up in (a frame of mind): 'Okay, this is what we're doing. This is the only thing that's happening'. There is other stuff. Whether it's good or bad is beside the point. But there (are) other people doing, maybe not the same thing, maybe not even similar, but there are other artist-run galleries. People setting up small gallery spaces in Brisbane that we have no real kind of idea about.

EW Steve, you were devastated that you missed that exhibition tonight.

(Laughs).

SR Well, I don't want to (adopt an attitude that suggests) what we're doing is the most important thing, or the only thing happening. Because other people are doing things as well. I think that we should be a little less provincial or ...

LB Close-minded.

SR Yeah. Or, I don't like the look of that or that's outside of ...

LB What we're about ...

SR Because it (the artist-run space) might have something in it that's good and the people might have something to offer ...

LB How boring if we do just keep to ourselves.

SR Exactly. I think that's what happens. You get this kind of circle. That's what happens with this kind of community (of ARIs). You get like-minded people and then everything closes in.

LB And then it gets smaller and smaller.

SR Or it just closes in and you (develop an attitude that) what we're doing is the most important thing in Brisbane. And that might not necessarily be so. Other things might challenge it. Other things might open our eyes to the different possibilities. It's kind of like an extension of this collaboration between MSSR, Box Copy and Accidentally Annie Street Space (AASS). Because we are doing different things but it is quite aligned. But that's a good start, I think.

EW So, I guess what we're saying is we don't currently have those lines of communication (with ARIs of a different model to AASS). But as more (ARIs) pop up, maybe we should or we will.

LB What do you mean?

EW Well, we're trying to establish whether we have better communications with some (ARIs) which we obviously do.

SR Yeah, definitely. Maybe it just comes down to an awareness thing. Just to be aware that there are these things happening. So there definitely is a shared ethos with some ARIs more (than) with others.

LB Well, you're always drawn to things that you're interested in.

SR I'm just wary of that kind of closed in (attitude): 'Here's the community. What we're doing is the most important thing that's happening. That's it. We don't want people to challenge that idea of what art is. Or what a show should be or what we should show or whatever'. You can get your idea of what's good or the best way to do something kind of set.

JL What issues do you feel need to be addressed in the operation of an artist-run space today?

LB Keep it light.

(Laughs).

SR Well, I think we do that.

LB Don't get Jacina to ask you questions.

(Laughs).

EW Issues. The lack of critical dialogue in Brisbane. Or places to submit writing (to). The distinct lack of (exhibition) space.

ES I think more people need to put in applications (exhibition proposals).

Yeah.

EW More interest.

LB What about curating shows? You know how we (currently) pick the people that we know (for exhibitions). (We need to spread the word about upcoming exhibitions) to the general public: 'Submissions going. This is the (curatorial) premise. If you're working with these kinds of ideas ...'

EW But you have to have people visiting your site or (otherwise) send out (a) bulk email.

ES What if no one applies?

LB Then you have a show with nothing in it (that conveys) the (lack of) interest (in) Brisbane ARIs. Then we're all just sitting here and saying: 'There's no art because no one will apply'.

ES You just need a database of work to work from.

Accidentally Annie Street Space consists of Stephen Russell, Elizabeth Willing, Erika Scott and Louise Bennett.

¹ Bridie, S. 1998. *Artists/artist-run spaces: interviews with artists from six Melbourne artists' spaces*. Victoria: Talk Artists Initiative and West Space Inc.