

brisbanedialogues

Jacina Leong

MSSR / Box Copy / No Frills*

Four Brisbane-based artist-run initiatives talk about the current state of alternative project spaces in this northern capital.

Jacina Leong What are the critical issues affecting the production and presentation of contemporary art in Brisbane?

Box Copy Understandably, this is an extensive topic and given my limited experience, having primarily exhibited in ARIs and smaller gallery spaces, I feel slightly inexperienced to respond to this question in full. So I am going to focus on the critical issues affecting the production and presentation of contemporary art by *young* and *emerging* artists. These issues will of course be based on my own experiences, so other artists will no doubt identify other concerns.

I would say the issue that has most immediate effect is the lack of support from commercial galleries and larger art institutions. Few of these galleries in Brisbane really provide consistent opportunities for young and emerging artists engaging in alternative art practices.

The Brisbane art community operates in a peripheral position in relation to the Australian contemporary art community, which itself holds a peripheral position in the international art community. This makes it difficult for young and emerging artists to foster relationships with other artists, curators and arts writers working outside Brisbane. Obviously, the internet has lessened the intensity of this, and emerging artists are proactive in establishing these connections, yet I think a sense of being somehow insulated from national and international contemporary art “centres” is still felt.

This creates another issue that affects contemporary art in Brisbane, and that is the desire to move elsewhere, either nationally or internationally, in order to “make it.”

These things which in my experience, are the fundamental critical issues affecting the production and presentation of contemporary art by young and emerging artists in Brisbane do not, however, have a crippling effect. They instead encourage a strong DIY culture among emerging practitioners, which has led to the formation of numerous Brisbane-based ARLs over the years.

JL 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?

MSSR Artist-run spaces, in a traditional sense of exhibition programs and the familiar model of a gallery environment, play a small role in the community. I think that by following the formal models of an ARI, propagated by the Australian Arts Council through its funding models and examples of ARIs in Melbourne or Sydney, the arts community will continue to operate outside community involvement and/or participation. The specific knowledge required to decipher presentations of contemporary art (within those models) is too specific and requires training and commitment.

However I believe Brisbane is in a unique position to differ itself from these traditional ARI models because it is essentially starting anew (with 5 new projects engaged specifically with contemporary art and projects created in the last 3 years). Inclusivity, as a reaction to institutional environments, in which Contemporary Art is presented with an aura of untouchability and cold distance, seems to be a concept relevant to a number of artist organised projects happening at the moment (MSSR, Accidentally Annie Street Space etc.). I believe it is also important to differentiate ARIs (as a term used for funding bodies to distinguish relevance of importance, or as a concept that pigeon holes artists into an 'emerging' and therefore scaleable category) with significant projects organised by artists (yet again possibly in reaction to institutional models of curator-based presentations). These strategies form the basis of experimental practices engaged with the making and presentation of contemporary visual products and ideas in non-economic and, hopefully, more community involved environments.

BC In Brisbane, there seems to be a lack of support for young and emerging artists who engage with experimental and innovative practices. Furthermore, it can take quite some time, post-university, to gain representation from a commercial gallery or to be exhibited in a larger art institution. So essentially, the role of the artist-run space is to address this lack of support for alternative art practices, by providing opportunities for emerging contemporary artists and encouraging critical engagement with new art.

No Frills* In response to Brett Jones:

The disjointed and sporadic nature of the ARI scene in Brisbane over the last 5 years or so perhaps does not conform to Jones' suggestion of 'normalisation'. Moments of community have been achieved but rarely in such a sustained and vibrant manner as might be said of Sydney or Melbourne. Unlike those communities I think Brisbane ARIs still have to advocate for their place and the place of emerging experimental practice in the wider arts community. Perhaps this more fundamental role prevents these initiatives from further experimentation with standard ARI models of operation.

Other thoughts:

Given the small number of commercial galleries representing emerging and mid-career contemporary artists in Australia and particularly Brisbane, ARIs take up the important task of providing space for these artists to exhibit at relatively little cost.

They provide a platform for artists to show work in a professional manner generally according with the exhibition practice of reputable contemporary art institutions. This includes publicity, criticism and installation. In this way these spaces also act as a support mechanism for those wishing to be taken up by highly regarded commercial or public institutions.

These initiatives provide a space where a critical engagement with ideas and materials is given precedence over economic and political concerns.

They are, as the name suggests, run by artists. This allows an engagement with and sympathy toward the particularities and general fluidity of art practice.

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?

BC Yes. There appears to be two schools of artist-run spaces operating in Brisbane at present. One seems to align itself more with, what I would identify as a Melbourne or Sydney model of artist-run space. These spaces place considerable emphasis on collaborative curatorial practice, and tend to support more experimental and critically engaged art practices.

The other school of artist-run space, whilst still technically artist-run, seem to function more like a commercial gallery, with a focus on more marketable art practices. There still seems to be a certain level of critical engagement with the work, but I see this as being secondary to the objective of creating opportunities to sell work.

Having said that, the essential objective of both schools of artists-run spaces is to provide support for emerging artists.

NF* Perhaps because of the small size of the ARI community in Brisbane (and I say this because I believe it is an issue elsewhere but is maybe less pronounced) two distinct streams of thought regarding the role of ARIs are apparent: one giving precedence to innovation and criticality and the other to community

involvement and commercial practices. Both approaches support artists and provide value to the arts community but I believe they operate under quite different principles. The former aspires to a level of criticality and professionalism surrounding its program that reflects that of reputable contemporary art institutions (as mentioned earlier) and the latter appears less discriminatory about its program and focuses on benefiting a maximum number of artists and patrons.

That they both operate under the term 'artist-run' becomes problematic not only as the term loses its specificity as a reference point for experimental practice but also as funding bodies set up grants particular to 'artist-run' projects. These initiatives have distinct aims but indistinct funding sources. This is an issue as it is often the less discriminatory projects that appear to benefit larger sectors of the community and are thus more attractive as a funding recipient. Although these projects create space for a large quantity of artists to exhibit, they do not provide the critical and professional support that is required to initiate and sustain the careers of critical contemporary artists.

As you may have gathered from the partiality of the above statements, No Frills* aligns itself with those spaces who give precedence to innovation and criticality.

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

MSSR It is essential Brisbane artists pursue new models of realising projects. If Brisbane is to foster a strong creative community it must differentiate itself from other major centres. Tertiary education needs to be reconfigured with education tailored to a localised set of concerns. The concept that, what Brisbane artists are making, is related to, or even relevant to, international artistic movements that occurred in the last 100 years denounces the value of our immediate

surroundings. Artists are responsible for their engagement with their own environment, and this, I believe could mark the difference between Brisbane and other Australian centres (who seem to perpetuate international styles and forms presented through accessible means of print and online arts journalism and the occasional half hour infotainment art world summary).

BC This comes back to the issue of support for young and emerging artists. To come to terms with this lack of support, these types of spaces need to engage with experimental and innovative artistic and curatorial practices and support young and emerging artists.

Also, away from the university environment it becomes increasingly important to maintain critical engagement with your own and others art practices. Thus delivering an exhibition program that encourages critical engagement and maintains a dialogue between peers, writers and curators is integral to the operation of an artist-run space.

NF* I think these initiatives grow quite organically out of partnerships or shared attitudes. These attitudes and relationships are specific and are inevitably reflected in the model and programming of each ARI. Given this, I think that although there are commonalities and rallying points (these are outlined in question one) that each initiative must address issues with a view to reflecting the specificity of its goals.

Specific to No Frills*:

No Frills* acknowledges the fluidity of emerging practices and seeks to challenge institutionalised methods of display by creating space for artists to explore the exhibition making process as a specific and necessary component of their work. No Frills* seeks to question the role of art and the artist in the contemporary environment through playful and rigorous creative practice.

No Frills* looks to advocate contemporary art making and viewing through a program dedicated to high quality exhibition practice. In accord with this view, No Frills* organises and accepts proposals for solo and collaborative exhibitions with the intent of cultivating direct responses to site in a manner that demonstrates and extends the practice of each artist. In this model the artist is allowed a degree of ownership over the manifestation of their work in an exhibition context.

MSSR consists of Brisbane-based artists Chris Bennie and Nicola Chatham.

Box Copy consists of Joseph Breikers, Channon Goodwin, Anita Holtsclaw, Tim Kerr, Daniel McKewen, Raymonde Rajkowski, Marianne Templeton and Tim Woodward.

The directors of No Frills* are Antoinette J. Citizen, Courtney Coombs, Catherine Sagin and Kate Woodcroft.

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