

Back to the Future: contemporary or alternative?

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of teaching over half the undergraduate students in my classes came from state schools in less than salubrious neighbourhoods. The last time I checked, a few years ago, only one mature age art theory student in the class had not attended a private school. I am not the only person to notice this change. Brenda L. Croft was studying at Sydney College of the Arts the year before HECs was introduced. She remembers the very rich cultural mix of generations, of rich and poor. "And then the next year you just saw the demographic change, overnight. And it's a generalisation to say it suddenly became privileged little snooty kids, but that's what it felt like."

Universities do try to reach rural, Indigenous and urban working class students by creating special access programs for the disadvantaged. But with the exception of Indigenous students, the overwhelming majority of undergraduates studying art (as distinct from vocational degrees) are now from the polite suburbs, and more often than not from wealthy backgrounds. Art schools have of course long had a role as a finishing school for the alienated children of the rich, but once these were leavened by outsiders, hungry for fame – using hand, eye and image to find their voices.

The shrinking cultural conversation is not limited to the visual arts, nor to Australia. It is a symptom of a society increasingly divided – what the USA calls the shrinking 'middle class' which is their name for the working class. Sean O'Hagen has written in *The Observer* (26 January 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/jan/26/working-class-hero-posh-britain-public-school>) of the increasingly 'posh' culture of British film and television as the rounded vowels of young old Etonians are replacing regional accents in popular film and television. He quotes the YBA artist Gary Hume as saying: "Art has become a respectable career path now, another professional option for the young and affluent. But what do all the wrong people do now? Where do they go – the misfits and the outsiders? If you can't do something meaningful through art because you can't afford to go to art college or even rent a studio, what happens to you?"

Another question worth asking is – what happens to art when only a small minority are given access to the ways and means of making it? We need to see the whole picture. ■

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Back to the future: contemporary or alternative?

■ Pat Hoffie

New IMA directors tell Pat Hoffie about their modus operandi

Most graduates exiting from art colleges in the twenty-first century could perhaps be forgiven for thinking that the contemporary art spaces scattered from state to state across Australia have always been there.

After all, there are probably few tertiary courses that deal with the more-or-less recent history of the emergence of Australia's 'art infrastructure'. The fact that the contemporary art spaces emerged in 1983 when the Australia Council for the Arts decided to grant regular funding to some of the more successful 'alternative art spaces' as they were known at the time¹, gets lost in the bureaucratic gloss. So glossy, in fact, that nowadays it's sometimes difficult to spot too much difference between Contemporary Art Spaces and State Galleries with the same artists popping up in both, along with the same kind of international roll-call favoured by international biennales. This is all the more ironic when we recall that part of the initial reason for their establishment by the Australia Council was to offer a different kind of exhibition program to that of the state galleries.

It's even more telling when the board membership of these institutions is considered. All too often employees of state galleries also serve on the boards of contemporary art spaces. Surely there are better ways to foster diversity in what is, after all, a comparatively small population. And of even more concern is that nowadays the meagre representation of artists

on some of these boards does not reflect the fact that such organisations emerged from the dedication and vision of artists – not from lawyers, architects, accountants or 'public representatives.'

There was a time when contemporary art spaces took the role of networking across broader, non-metropolitan arts communities more seriously, and it's safe to say that the results may often have been more 'ragged', more experimental, sometimes even more perplexing, but they didn't offer the readymade one-size-fits-all slick exhibition programming that is now replicated in so many state and contemporary art galleries.

One could, perhaps, be forgiven for longing for change. With that in mind, the very recent arrival of two spanning new young Directors to the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane may present an opportunity to challenge some of the more staid directorial approaches to such roles.

Nine days before the time of writing Aileen Burns and Johan Lundh took up their position as the new Directors of the IMA. Already experienced in writing and curating collaboratively in their role as co-directors of an arts organisation in Derry, Ireland, the option of continuing to work as a collaborative directorial team as well as being a married couple seemed the obvious next choice to them.

This approach to life did not, however, seem so obvious to others: they described some of the managerial hurdles that had to be overcome in order to bring their aims to

actualisation: when they applied for working visas to take up the position questions were raised about why two people were applying to do one job. "It also poses certain bureaucratic questions," Johan explains, "when two people – instead of one – have to sign off on decisions made by the institutional directors". However for these two any potential managerial difficulties are more than offset by the creative charge of collaboration.

Aileen and Johan describe how "artists have been working collaboratively for aeons and most architectural processes are collaborative". Both agree that the work they produce collaboratively is very different to that which they have produced as individuals. They describe the process of writing they collaborate on together: "The writing gets flicked back and forth via email even though we might be sitting opposite each other on the same desk," Aileen explains. "It's worked through until it's resolved – there's compromise and adjustments all through the process, but in the end it's usually better because of the input of two approaches."

Johan cites the phenomenon of the 'star-curator' – those who take on the role with such self-interest that they overshadow the art and artists they work with. It's a role that's not unfamiliar, but it's not a role the duo seeks to emulate: "I mean you can never completely escape authorship – but identity will accrue one way or another – we work in a way that brings in the ideas and approaches of others." The collaboration that underpins their own approach to what they do also underpins their commitment to extending this into working with others – with artists, with audiences, with institutions and organisations and other members of the community.

Aileen and Johan arrived in Brisbane fresh from their Christmas holidays in Toronto, the city Aileen hails from. Johan is from Sweden where he completed his graduate and curatorial studies at Konstfack, an institution modelled on Bauhaus principles, then moved to Canada where he continued curating in Toronto. However even though the two lived and worked in art in the same city at the same time, they didn't meet until they both moved to New York where Johan was working at *e-flux*, an arts organisation that started out as an arts project and developed into a business distributing information about exhibitions, talks and journals, and Aileen was studying art history in New York where she completed a graduate degree in critical and curatorial studies at Columbia University.

From New York they moved together to Berlin where they worked independently in curatorial and writing work for two years after which they took a job in Derry in Northern Ireland as the Directors of the Centre for Contemporary Art. Aileen and Johan talked about how the stark contrast between the scale, ambience and demands of the Derry community compared with their experiences in what they describe as the 'art centres' of New York and Berlin, and explained how the contrast between these experiences provided a platform for their choice to apply for the job in Brisbane as a place that "offered the scope for challenging the norms that is sometimes better to do from more peripheral cities." When asked, in response to this description, about whether they subscribed to any centre-periphery model for international art

production, Johan explained that while they didn't necessarily hold to that model: "45% of the international art sales still come from Europe and the US," and that: "New York and Berlin, for example, have a critical mass that other cities can't match." Johan explained: "it's easier to experiment and take the risk of failure in smaller places – they can enable a more experimental approach."

They describe their approach to creating 'thematic seasons' during their directorship in Derry – of programming according to relevant socio-political concerns. They describe how the high unemployment rate in Derry provided one of the underpinning *leitmotifs* to their curatorial decision-making during the time – about how the idea of work and leisure, for example, were raised for critical re-questioning through exhibitions and programming. However, they add, they expect that the Brisbane IMA context is likely to raise some very different directions that will steer their programming, due to start in October 2014. Until then, however, they intend to build projects around the exhibition programs they've inherited, and they flag that the new website they'll launch in March, together with the different 'look' in press releases, public programs and educational projects will reflect differences through the language they use and their style of approach.

The two share a passion in their belief in the capacity of "artists to show us the world in a new light. Whether in a mysterious or beautiful way or whether reflective of the confused, unresolved and disruptive state of existence, contemporary art can help us to see how we are and where we are as a species." Yet this enthusiasm is tempered by their awareness of the responsibility of contemporary art institutions: "Public spaces in the world seem to be shrinking as the safe-guarding of freedom of speech is being gradually sold out to big business. At its best art can offer a place where conversations about unresolved issues can still be discussed – places and spaces we need if we are to still call ourselves an open society." And to the suggestion that the audiences of contemporary art spaces seem to be shrinking to include only those few already converted, they respond that although every field has its specialists, it is part of their responsibility as directors to "get in all kinds of people – even those who don't know anything about art – to look at art and to talk about the issues and ideas art raises."

There's a refreshing candour to their approach. In response to the limitations of the audience demographic currently attracted by the IMA, they simply respond: "We have work to do." And as if in response to an unasked question about their experience, they state: "We are quite young still but we embark on the things we embark on because we don't know – curiosity is the main driving force behind what we do. We don't see this role as a chance to tell the world how it should be; we see it as a chance to work with others." In terms of the more recent history of the IMA, their approach could offer some positive new directions. ■

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¹ There was a change of nomenclature in 1982 at the first national conference of alternative art spaces *Open Sandwich*, held in Hobart, where Jude Adams pointed out that they were in fact no longer truly alternative, and suggested the word Contemporary would be more appropriate.