

OPEN SANDWICH CONFERENCE OF ALTERNATIVE ART SPACES*

A Working Paper

David Kerr, E.A.F.

'Open Sandwich' , the first national conference of Australian 'Alternative Art Spaces' happened on May 24th., 25th., 26th. in Hobart. The context was the second ANZART event, a gathering of Australian and New Zealand artists for the making and exhibiting of art work. The conference was organised by the Experimental Art Foundation. \$2,750 funding was received from the Visual Arts Board to assist with airfares to fly representatives of the art spaces to Hobart, and to cover some of the organisational costs. Other 'alternative art space' representatives were assisted in their travel to the conference by ANZART as participants in that event.

Artspaces represented at the conference were:

A CENTRE

c/- 36 Colombo St.

Newtown,

Wellington, N.Z.

contact: Vivian Lynn/ Jurgen Waibel

ALPHA HOUSE and BETAVILLE

Sydney NSW

ART NETWORK

11 Randle St.,

Surrey Hills

NSW 2010

contact: Peter Thorn, Richard McMillan

ARTSPACE

11 Randle St.,

Surrey Hills NSW 2010

contact: Judy Annear

* 'Alternative art space' is a term used widely prior to the conference. The conference recommended it be replaced with 'Contemporary art space'.

ART UNIT

84-86 Henderson Rd.,
Alexandria, NSW 2015
contact: Rob McDonald/ Julie Prior

Australian Centre for Photography
257 Oxford St.,
Paddington , NSW 2021
contact: Tamara Winnicoff

BITUMEN RIVER

cnr. Furneaux and Bouganville Sts.,
Manuka, ACT 2603
contact: Alison Alder

CHAMELEON

G.P.O.Box 281C
Hobart, TAS 7001
contact: Bo Jones

CLIFTON HILL COMMUNITY MUSIC CENTRE

25 John St.,
Clifton Hill, VIC 3068
contact Andrew Preston

EXPERIMENTAL ART FOUNDATION

P.O.Box 167,
Stepney, S.A. 5069
contact: David Kerr/ Christine Goodwin

GEORGE PATON GALLERY

2nd. floor, Union House,
Melbourne University,
Parkville, VIC. 3052
contact: Denise McGrath

HARDENED ARTERIES

c/- Sydney College for the Arts

INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART
P.O.Box 1897
Brisbane, QLD. 4001
contact: Barbara Campbell

MEDIA SPACE
51 Goderich st.,
East Perth, W.A. 6000
contact: Alan Vizents

ONE FLAT EXHIBIT
355 George St.,
Brisbane, QLD. 7000
contact: Janelle Hurst

PRAXIS
P.O. Box 536,
Fremantle, W.A. 6160
contact: Julian Goddard

Taranaki Artists Cooperative (TACO)
Main South Road,
New Plymouth, N.Z.
contact: Dave James/ Tom Much/ Michael Smithers

WOMENS ART MOVEMENT
238 Rundle St.,
Adelaide S.A. 5000
contact: Anne Marsh/ Jane Kent

It has been timely, in fact overdue, for this very informal network of the various forms of alternative art spaces to get together to state and review what needs they emerged from, and to reassess their methods of operation. The conference was structured to bring as many issues as possible into the open; to lay bare the rationale and structure of this phenomena of the 1970's for re-examination; and to piece it back together for the 1980's. That proved to be a very ambitious task for three days, but did prove successful as a starting point for dialogue between spaces, and should remain an ongoing activity.

The first day and a half brought an introductory address from Bernice Murphy (curator of contemporary art, A.G. of NSW) in which she talked to her articles in ART NETWORK Nos. 6&7, providing a comparative history context to the conference; overviews were given on the history and operations of the 18 spaces/structures represented at the conference; papers by Judy Annear (Artspace, NSW), Jude Adams (EAF, SA) and Denise McGrath (George Paton Gallery, Vic.) on the present and future roles of alternative art spaces; statements from six artists [Jon Rose (NSW), Bonita Ely (Vic/NSW), Barbara Strathdee (NZ), Alison Alder (ACT), Dave Watt (SA/Tas) and Judie Lovell (Vic)] on the current relationship between spaces and artists; papers presented on Networking by Ian Hunter (NZ) and Grace Cockeran (Tas); papers by David Kerr (EAF/SA) and Julian Goddard (Praxis, WA) on Funding Strategies for the '80's; and a paper by Tamara Winnicoff (ACP, NSW) on the development of a visual arts lobby.

In short, where did we come from, where are we now, where should we go from here, and how best do we do it.

The issues raised in these papers/statements and the subsequent discussions covered the following inter-related areas:

1. Needs (of artists and art) determining the roles of spaces:

Represented at the conference were many and varied art spaces that have all been categorised as 'alternative'. Alternatives to what?, was often asked: and some spaces claimed to be alternatives to the alternatives, as a way of pointing up the out-moded term. Some spaces have been in existence for a decade, others for less than a year. Some have a broad and large members in and programme, others a small membership and flexible programme, catered to itself. Some rely almost totally on external funding, others occasionally

or not at all. Some are essentially radical, others incidentally.

It was valuable to have Bernice Murphy present an historical backdrop against which this diverse display of art structures could be placed. But the mind still boggled at the prospect of doing more than considering the variety of approaches to an activity.

The 1970's spaces/ structures emerged to facilitate an art practice that explored new forms and contexts for work, and they came to be called 'alternative art spaces'. Their rationale was broadly to instigate and facilitate experimental art work and new models of cultural production; they could tolerate failure or tentative beginnings; and they were expressions of contemporary concerns and issues. This represented a potential paradigm shift for art practice. Ironically, though, they have still remained, to a greater or lesser extent, validating structure for artists in the same way that institutional art previously operated. The notion of oppositional work was not understood beyond avant garde vs. establishment. An important exception to this in Australia, N.Z. and elsewhere has been that part of the womens movement in art that engaged life issues rather than persuing a careerist model .

From the needs expressed at the conference there seems to be a consensus in the need for structures of some sort that act, at the base line, as a community of ideas, a place for analysis, and a pool of resources. There would also appear to be a current validity in the 1970's broad rationale mentioned above.

Now in the 1980's there is a variety of spaces coexisting or existing separately in major centres. This represents a diversity of approaches to cultural production, both between spaces and within the programs of some individual spaces; it also represents the initiating and facilitating of different parts of the process by which an idea becomes manifest within the culture.

There was a general statement of the need for financial assistance to all these activities.

2. Roles of spaces determining their structure:

Along with the diversity of approaches to cultural production comes an obvious diversity of structures. They range between member representative managements to member managements. A determination expressed by the conference was a need for a more conscious and consistent examination of the role of alternative art spaces in the whole area of cultural production. There was also a call to incorporate the notion of continual change into the structure of the spaces themselves. This implies that spaces need to have a programme of activities that is consciously decided upon (ie. justifiable) and that these activities run for fixed, reviewable time periods. It also implies an easy accessibility to the decision making body from the membership, for presentation of ideas on matters of policy or programming.

3. Structures determining needs of spaces:

The prime need of spaces is for continued funding to support their programmes of activities. In all cases of spaces that have been in operation for some time, the level of financial assistance has decreased as work loads have increased. This produces problems of underdeveloped programmes and/or staff burn-out. The emergence of new spaces also in need of financial assistance to realise their aims and investigations presents further monetary demands on arts support structures. The session on a visual arts lobby, presented through a paper by Tamara Winnicoff, provided an excellent starting point for renegotiating the marginal status of the visual arts and, within that, the 'alternative' art spaces. Consistent with this were ^{many} suggestions for approaching other than government arts funding authorities for supplementary support. Suggestions were also made about the responsibilities in the spending of public money; these being a need to project activities out of art spaces, and to keep records of the activities undertaken. Given the haphazard way in which spaces have come into existence, there has been very informal relationships between them. A tightening of this network will have obvious implications in developing joint strategies for the generation of ideas on cultural practice. programming activities, information exchange, artist exchange, financial viability, and management structures.

The second day and a half ~~xxxxxx~~ of the conference moved 20 -25 of the delegates into a conference procedure adapted from the 'search conference' process. Two group leaders engaged the delegates in brainstorming to identify agreement on key issues relevant to art making and the facilitation of art investigations in the 1980's. On the basis of these issues, strategies for action were formed and reported back to the plenary session. Ideally this session needed three days to work well. Nevertheless, the following conclusions were reached:

- to recommend that the name 'alternative art spaces' be changed to 'contemporary art spaces of Australia'
- we have identified three types of management structures that exist in the contemporary art spaces of Australia;
 - (1) member managed
 - (2) member representative managed
 - (3) management by external appointment
- to recommend all spaces review and restate their aims
- to recommend that all spaces reassess their management structure
- to endorse the establishment of a visual arts lobby.
- to develop a network of contemporary art spaces
- to make a date for another meeting of contemporary art spaces (a date of March 1984 in Adelaide was tentatively set)
- to forward a statement of policy to the Australia Council accompanied by a suggestion that a new funding category be established to take account of contemporary art spaces.

That statement reads: "This conference recommends that the Australia Council formally recognise the existence of an extensive network of contemporary art spaces in Australia; that they reaffirm their support and that financial assistance be directed towards these in the light of the significance of the art practice generated through these spaces. Further, that new sources of funding be found for spaces which have not yet or do not now receive support."

While the conclusions don't appear to state much more than what was perceived as needs at the outset of the conference, huge gains were made by finding that many other groups of people were grappling with similar issues to one's own. Putting faces to phone voices or writing styles was important enough for breaking down isolation; but, as Ian Hunter pointed out in his talk on networking, the real value of networking is the placing of people face to face, for that sets up a process for challenging who you are and what you are doing. And, this process is a generative one.