

Crisis What Crisis?

INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING ON CONTEMPORARY ART IN MELBOURNE

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For some time there have been accusations that art criticism is in crisis, which would presume some kind of decisive turning point in a sequence of events has been reached. This seems a dubious descriptor after so many decades of discussion on the topic. The claim of “criticism in crisis” in fact seems to be made mostly by critics themselves and in reference to the most mainstream of art criticism, newspaper reviews in particular often coming under attack. Yet in a vast arena of scholarship and writing about writing, little comment has been made on the more specialised publishing activity generated within the contemporary art community itself. Investigation into this field might ask—is this also an area under attack or in crisis; how does independent publishing differ in function from mainstream criticism, if at all; and what is the current state of independent writing and publishing on contemporary art?

Currently there is a wide range of strategies, motivations and ideas at play in independent publishing projects from around Australia and New Zealand; whether they are self-published by artists, or produced by contemporary art organisations, or editorial collectives working on alternative magazine projects. When surveying this “shadow economy”¹ it is important to begin by acknowledging the diversity of projects and that the particular function of something must be at the base of any attempt to measure its relative success, failure or value. American-based philosopher and art writer David Carrier suggests that “to understand the differences between philosophy, literature and art writing we need to understand how its context determines the function and meaning of this writing”.²

Perhaps the notion of crisis relates more to a confusion or conflation of the functions of art writing and the fact that within a narrow field, the lines of objectivity might sometimes be blurred. The practice is one characterised by an inherent tension, derived from the problem of representing the visual or experiential in language. This is certainly nothing new; art writers, historians and critics have long been aware of the shortcomings of language—Michael Baxandall for one making the observation that “any language is a conspiracy against experience”.³ And more recently critic Dave Hickey, acknowledged that “whatever I have written departs. It enters the historical past... while the visible artefact remains in the present moment.”⁴

This near impossibility of finding language to fit a non-linguistic art form begs the question, what is all the writing about art actually for? Historically, the development of art writing can be strongly linked to the development of museums and galleries. Many point to the Paris Salon exhibitions of the mid-nineteenth-century, when pamphlets and catalogues began to accompany exhibitions, as the first point in time when art

writing had a function intrinsic with showing contemporary art. At this point the genre of criticism was conceived as distinct from art history. Carrier, who has throughout his career analysed art writing as a literary genre, has argued that its function is relative to its context, but its base suggests that art writing “aims to initiate and support discussions about art. The more richly suggestive perspectives we have, the more productive will be our conversations in museums and art galleries.”⁵

Apart from this philosophical question of the function of art writing, other more pragmatic or external factors also have an impact on the field of art writing and criticism. Discussing some of these problems in a recent article for the *Australian Book Review*, Luke Morgan presented an overview of current Australian art criticism, which concluded the field to be polymorphous with many venues and voices but in a relatively poor state of health.⁶ Morgan quoted critics and academics who were asked to identify some of the problems and constraints of writing about art. The main points included a decreasing amount of dedicated column space for critical reviews in public newspapers, matched by increasing promotion and marketing. Morgan also recognised a disturbing trend whereby the language of the press release has crept into art writing.

In terms of the power or influence of criticism, the role of art collectors and curators is said to have superseded critics in the hierarchy of the art industry. In response to this point, Charles Green (Associate Professor in Art History at the University of Melbourne) commented that “the proper functions of criticism have been appropriated by curatorship” and Daniel Palmer (Lecturer in Art and Design Theory at Monash University) agreed; “Curators and gallerists are far more powerful filtering agents than the cacophony of critics.” These comments would suggest that criticism does not play any significant part in the commerce of the art world, which should surely be seen as a freedom rather than a loss for critics and writers.

Then there is the question of style, and the common complaint that art criticism can tend to be confusing or incomprehensible, yet equally problematic is the perception of an homogenised, authoritarian voice of art criticism seen to be making dictatorial judgements. Finding solutions to these concerns would rely largely on art writers understanding and addressing the needs of their audiences. If the readership is multifaceted, like that of the newspaper, the critic will be pulled in different directions by felt obligations to the art industry and the general public. As art critic for *The Age*, Robert Nelson has pointed out the needs and expectations of these two audiences will never converge.⁷

One of Melbourne’s most recent independently published art review journals, *un Magazine* was instigated in 2004 by a local artist Lily Hibberd, who took a very altruistic approach to a problem she identified in the art community, namely “a gaping hole in the sector that is the localised critique of emerging contemporary art”.⁸

Like many of the alternative art magazines of the 1970s, *un Magazine* took a collective approach and was run by an editorial committee. This was primarily for pragmatic reasons—the work involved in editing and coordinating the quarterly journal to a consistent standard required the efforts of more than one person. Hibberd identified its motivations and aims to include the following—to foster emerging art writers by providing space for them to develop their craft; to contribute to a historical record; and to support and remain relevant by publishing reviews and critiques of local art primarily for its local community. With a more tightly defined readership the clearly articulated aims of this project avoided the confusion of function and audience identified as a problem for mainstream criticism. The underlining principle was that contemporary art needs an engaged audience, evidenced by dialogue, which necessarily must involve more than one voice.

Un Magazine was a direct attempt to provide a space for, and to engage in critical dialogue. It may in part have been conceived in reaction to the problem of a lack of column space for reviews of local contemporary art, and also the problem identified by Hibberd of little opportunity for young and emerging art writers to get published. This situation is at odds with the strong network of artist-run initiatives (ARI) in Melbourne providing exhibition opportunities for emerging artists, resulting in a field with so much art and not enough critical response.

Support from the art community and a dedicated team of individuals making up the editorial committee, allowed *un Magazine* to remain in production for three years. However it has been unable to secure ongoing funding and the production of a quarterly magazine was exacting, falling largely on the shoulders of one volunteer editor. To sustain publications the size and substance of *un*, ongoing and adequate support is required.

Many artist-run initiatives and contemporary art organisations in Melbourne produce ephemeral printed matter in the style of photocopied pamphlets or flyers for exhibitions. Most also have a web presence and produce more substantial catalogues when funding allows. For example, West Space Inc. is one of the longest running ARIs in Melbourne and has always had a strong commitment to writing and publishing in relation to contemporary art practice. In 2004 West Space published

Form and Formation, a hard cover publication to celebrate and document their first ten years. Published in a limited edition in partnership with local designers 3 Deep Publishing, the book was perhaps a return to the concept of *luxe de livre*, revering the form of the book as a desirable object of value. Another recent Melbourne example of this style of anniversary publication is *A Short Ride in a Fast Machine: Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces 1985–2005*.

These publications are part documentation, celebration and self-historicisation. The West Space book contained a great deal of visual documentation, detailed lists of projects and texts pulled from the office archives—including extracts from funding applications and correspondence, which all combined to provide an interesting and usually unseen history of an organisation. Also included were ten essays written by individuals who have had various involvements with West Space over its lifespan. While this may have been an attempt to achieve multiple points of view, at times the essays seemed to mount an argument to funding bodies—(edited by the founding director of West Space, acknowledgement should have been made of the writing and editing one's own history). *Form and Formation* gave West Space the opportunity to position itself as an organisation and participant in a contemporary art network.

Other substantial and one-off publications have appeared in recent times. Notably, the Sydney based ARI Loose Projects produced a book compilation of writing and page artworks in response to the 2006 *Biennale of Sydney*, the book's title *Cones of Zontac* playing on the *Biennale's* theme of 'Zones of Contact'. Artist organisations in New Zealand also have a broad range of publishing projects. The long-running High Street Project in Christchurch has recently reinvented its existing newsletter as a twenty-page screenprinted limited edition.

The emergence of a contemporary art community conducive to publishing in Australia may share parallels to the development from the 1970s onwards of ARIs and collectives, as well as the strong conceptual art movement at that time. Yet even in 1977 in a collaborative publication of the *ICA* magazine, *Sculpture Centre Bulletin* and *CAS (SA) Broadsheet*, it was noted that "there exists no adequate forum for the critical examination of contemporary innovative art in Australia."⁹ Individual artists have also contributed to the spectrum of art publishing, for example Ian Burn bringing the international Art & Language movement to Australia in the 1970s, and John Nixon in the 1990s producing *Material*, a magazine format collection of artist's pages.

Looking at the publishing projects of artists A Constructed World, we are again reminded that dialogue needs more than one voice. Their current publishing outlet is *SPEECH*, an online blogsite for reviews and discussion around contemporary art issues (www.speech2012.blogspot.com). *SPEECH* was established in 2005, but the artists behind A Constructed World (Geoff Lowe and Jacqueline Riva) have a long history of publishing as part of their art practice. From 1993–2002 the artists edited and self-published a magazine called *Artfan*, the title nicely reflecting the aim of the magazine as described in its first editorial to be a kind of 'art fanzine'. In an attempt to uncover a range of opinions, *Artfan* followed a specific format, whereby four different people were invited to write reviews of the same exhibition. These competing voices were represented by a critic, an artist, someone from another profession and a member of the general public (someone who said they knew

nothing about contemporary art). The editors stated; "the idea was to open up the space for competing voices and to include people not usually involved in contemporary art."¹⁰

Melbourne based art critic and curator Stuart Koop has described *Artfan* magazine as the means through which A Constructed World "have most clearly illustrated their integrating (or editorial) role, combining the views of all sorts of people; butchers, bakers, candlestick makers as well as artists, curators et al., all linked by their interest in art."¹¹ In essence, *Artfan* was an extension of A Constructed World's artistic practice, which involves creating and exploring the relationship and interaction with art community or audience through performance, installation, painting and video. Discussing their motivation to publish in 1997, Geoff Lowe noted that "there seemed to be no real audience for art".¹² This echoed the editorial of the first issue of *Artfan*, which stated that "contemporary art is still somewhat isolated from its audience".¹³ In response to this feeling of isolation and also in reaction to the perceived homogeneity or elitism in art discourse, *Artfan* attempted to "explore relationships between high levels of specialisation and amateur language".¹⁴

Artist and editor Jacqueline Riva has described *SPEECH* as the latest incarnation of *Artfan*, and although there are clear differences in format and structure, the principles seem fairly consistent. As a blogspot *SPEECH* is freely hosted and accessible on the internet and therefore circumvents many funding and distribution challenges of printed journals. Freedom from print also lends an immediacy and an international perspective to reviews and discussion. *SPEECH* draws on a pool of semi-regular reviewers and contributors, but visitors to the site can contribute their own comments—allowing (like *Artfan*) for varied and competing voices to be published and additionally enabling the reader to also become a writer. *SPEECH* attempts to represent more open and risky discussions around contemporary art, the editors keen to see in writing the kinds of things people say and discuss more freely and verbosely at exhibition openings.

While not facing the same hurdles of funding and distribution as a print magazine, *SPEECH* still relies on the voluntary contributions of writers and has identified other problems. One point of concern raised on the *SPEECH* site has been the issue of anonymity, as people can publish comments online without attaching their names. While the anonymity factor may point to a fear or unwillingness to state an unpopular opinion on the record, it can also work as a liberating mechanism by which more honest and critical views can be aired.

Looking at these independent publishing projects, generated within and for the contemporary art community, many of the standard claims around a 'crisis in criticism' seem to dissipate. Individual projects may have specific functions, such as the artist-run initiatives documenting their own histories or the energetic fostering of new talent and other voices. Alternative formats such as artists or gallerists commissioning catalogue essays, or groups producing DIY artzines such as the new *Be Young & Shut Up* publication, each have their own motivations and potential problems.

But when looked at together, along with the review journals like *un Magazine* and online forums like *SPEECH*, we find that sought after notion—a variety of voices engaged in a dialogue. These voices redress the lack of column space, they review and discuss aspects of the local contemporary art scene that are otherwise excluded and they find ways to get around the necessities of funding and distribution. They reflect and encourage a multiplicity of viewpoints within art discourse and many actively seek to avoid any homogenised or authoritarian position. In short, independent art writing and publishing projects seem to follow Carrier's definition of art writing, it "aims to initiate and support discussions about art".¹⁵ And the impact of discourse should not be underestimated; to quote again from an *Artfan* editorial; "Historically new art is a result of changing and hopefully enlarging audiences and here is one representation of that."¹⁶

Notes

¹ This phrase is taken from the title of New Zealand art writer Justin Paton's paper presented at the *Melbourne Art Fair 2006 Forum*, 2 August 2006

² David Carrier, *Writing About Visual Art*, New York: Allworth Press 2003: 106

³ Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, 1971

⁴ Dave Hickey, 'Critical Reflections', *Artforum*, Summer 1995: 81

⁵ David Carrier, op.cit: 110

⁶ Luke Morgan, 'Australian Art Criticism and Its Discontents', *Australian Book Review*, March 2006

⁷ Robert Nelson, paper presented at the *Melbourne Art Fair 2006 Forum*, 2 August 2006

⁸ Lily Hibberd, 'Why Write About Art?', *Hatched Symposium*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2005

⁹ Paul McGillick & Terry Reid, *Introduction, Manifestos, Statements, and Other Follies*, 1977

¹⁰ Geoff Lowe & Jacqueline Riva, 'Artfan and Artfan Live', *Plausible Artworlds Forum*, <http://plausibleartworlds.org/>, 2006

¹¹ Stuart Koop, 'A Constructed World', *Broadsheet* Vol 32 No 2, 2003: 31

¹² Geoff Lowe, quoted in 'Conversation of A Constructed World and Sue Cramer', *Like Art Magazine* 4, 1997

¹³ Geoff Lowe & Jacqueline Riva, 'Editorial', *Artfan* 1, 1993

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ David Carrier, op.cit: 106

¹⁶ Geoff Lowe & Jacqueline Riva, 'Editorial', *Artfan* 3 & 4, 1994