

Where Are We Now? - Artist Run Projects and the Internet

There is no denying that the activities and purpose of artist run projects have, in recent years been the topic of sustained discussion. However, the increasing importance of the internet in these operations has been, for the most part, rarely considered. What follows is a discussion of the ways in which artist run projects have responded to and engaged with the idea of web “presence”. How do artist run projects that see their main area of activity as being gallery based use the web? And perhaps more importantly, what possibilities does the internet offer to such projects?

From the outset it is important that I draw a distinction between net.art projects that have their only presence in the online environment and those artist run projects that exist simultaneously on the web and in “real space”. While these two areas are anything but mutually exclusive, for the purpose of this discussion I wish to concentrate on those web presences of artist run projects that exist as parallels or supplements to activities based around the exhibition of artworks in a traditional gallery setting. It is my intention to consider the idea of networked web space in relation to pre-existing forms of display and activity rather than as a replacement.

While the exact nature of what constitutes an artist run project defies precise definition, a number of recurrent traits and processes can be identified. For the most part, artist run projects are defined by a drive for self determination and a responsiveness to a variety of forces – aesthetic, cultural, political, spatial, economic.... Viewed individually each project is similar though different, its uniqueness shaped by environmental factors as much as by the vision of the artists involved. If we are to broaden our view to survey artist run organisations on a national or, perhaps more usefully, an international level we can map a system of relations and connections that at once define and shape each constituent part. Artists move between spaces and ideas are exchanged within this fluid and open network of projects.

A network of cells each operating independently, but with at the very least, an idea of what a number of similar organisations are undertaking. In recent times the concept of the network has been invested with a particular cultural resonance - much has been made of the effectiveness of such structures when deployed by radical organisations. A recent article by JJ King in Mute Magazine¹ outlined how the US military was examining ways of incorporating such structures into their top heavy system of command. The network is most certainly a potent and effective model for the times. But one could argue that networks have always been the way to get things done. A cursory glance at the web based project www.theyrule.net² reveals the ingrainedness of “networking” in American corporate culture – not to mention the conflicts of interest. But rather than the essentially closed system of these old boys clubs, artist run projects create networks that are both open and responsive.

For the most part artist run projects have used the internet as a way of creating a presence for themselves beyond their physical base – a kind of virtual shop front. A quick search of the web reveals literally hundreds (thousands?) of organisations world

wide, who have for various reasons, established web sites as part of their activities. That artist run projects have on this level, responded to the easy accessibility of information made possible by the web is hardly surprising, providing as it does a reach of informational presence previously undreamed of. If you want to find out about the process for proposing a project to a particular space in London or if you want to know if there are any artist run galleries in Manitoba Canada you can, and in minutes.

At this most basic level of presence the advent of the world wide web certainly must be seen as having an impact on the way in which artist run projects disseminate information regarding their activities and just as importantly their existence. How we go about gauging this impact and whether we really need to is another matter. Certainly the rise in recent years of explicit discussions addressing the nature of artist directed projects such as the Space Traffic³ conference hosted by Para site Art Space in Hong Kong have in no small way been made possible by the internet. The agency of the world wide web as a type of ready made networking infrastructure in furthering a mutual awareness between artist run projects of their goals and experiences cannot be discounted.

In speculating on the potentialities of the internet it is perhaps most useful to examine the ways in which artist run projects have, to date, manifested their presence on the world wide web. What forms do these websites take and how do they operate? What constitutes their content? And perhaps most importantly what space does art occupy?

Almost without exception the websites of artist run projects, at their core at least, conform to a model that has become the norm for doing (e)business in the web environment. While aesthetic and info-design approaches vary there is an adherence to a design approach that privileges the clearly marked interfaces and stable logical structures of info/commercial websites over the more volatile and slippery user models explored within the realms of net-art. It could be argued that this is as much a result of resources as anything else – almost anyone can string together a series of html based web pages whereas the construction of anything beyond that requires at the very least a modicum of scripting knowledge. However, it seems that there are other forces at work, perhaps the strongest of which is simply a desire to be understood and taken seriously.

Location, opening hours, programme, application details, statement of intent.

Given the large amount of personal commitment invested in Artist Run Projects and the often tenuous financial circumstances such organisations operate under it is not surprising that such a model of utilitarian publishing has come to define their web presence. It is a model that provides readily accessible information and as such facilitates the building of networks between artists and like minded organisations. Indeed it is difficult to see how any other model could be employed without sacrificing some of the purposefulness with which Artist Run Projects present themselves on the web.

So it seems that advocating a position that calls for a radicalisation of the form of websites of artist run projects needlessly undermines the intentions and usefulness of these web presences. However, it is worth considering that websites like all other forms,

have the ability to possess a certain depth, in which lurks the potential for intervention, exploration and expansion. If we are to take user-friendliness and structural clarity as givens in the form that Artist Run Projects websites take there is nothing to say that we should expect this to be played out in any but the most utilitarian level of the site. While the shop-front metaphor holds true in that we can gain information regarding location, activities etc. there clearly exist a number of possible engagements with the web as both medium and media for presenting and creating not just information but also art.

If we are to consider these engagements, the most common would be the expansion of the website to accommodate an online archive of past exhibitions and events. The online archive at once sidesteps the often prohibitive expense associated with printed publications while providing the advantage of being easily updated and cross referenced by means of hyper linking. Individually, each artist run project archive presents a record of activities while providing, by way of an overview some of the flavour of each particular project. Viewed collectively, the cumulative effect is palpable, these archives become an alternative history of recent contemporary art practice. One can't help but think how much easier the lives of curators are made by the existence of such resources, in theory anyway.

While the model of the archive has been embraced by artist run projects, it is somewhat surprising that so few organisations have sort to extend their engagement with the internet beyond the display of pre-existing works. There are however a number of cogent examples of artist run projects that have sort to extend their gallery based activities to the web. One way in which artist run projects have moved beyond a simple model of display is by facilitating and commissioning works specifically made for the online environment.

The Audio Art Exchange Online (aaeol)⁴ operated by the Western Front Artist Run Centre of Vancouver Canada⁵ is, in their own words, "...aimed at presenting an ongoing program of audio-art and web-poetic media works on the Internet." As such aaeol is an extension of the activities of the Western Front centre that specifically uses the internet both a medium for distribution and creation. Given that Western Front is an organisation "dedicated to the production, exhibition, and promotion of contemporary electronic/media art" the use of the web environment is perfectly logical, if not unavoidable.

While this coupling of new media and the web is perhaps the most obvious way in which artist run projects can work with the internet, it would be counterproductive to consider it the only. Indeed the internet offers the possibility to conceive of unique and conceptually resonant projects that are reliant on the most basic of text and image presentation

One of the most engaging of this type of online work is the recent adistillery project⁶ by Michelle Deignan and Simon Goodwin for Hoxton Distillery an artist Run Gallery situated above a pub in Central London. The project, essentially a time based exploration of "the mutability of a specific set of materials" was undertaken in the artists studio over a number of months with the research, progress and documentation of the process simultaneously posted to a website. The website was

used as a focal point for the project providing both a context and a medium for the work to exist. Indeed, without such context it would be perhaps difficult to recognise the artistic intention in Deignan and Goodwin's project of bootlegging and boozing.

The Transaction project initiated by West Space Gallery⁷ in Melbourne in 1998 employed a similar approach to the use of the internet website as a type of process record. The project involved a circular system of continuous creation and exchange of artworks between participants in Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, USA and the Netherlands. An internet site provided a focal point and visual record of the project as it progressed and as such the site was always in a state of becoming. The participants in the project were able to track the progress of the project and communicated via email. The Transaction project extended upon the use of the website as a display medium by employing it as a responsive fluid environment which preceded an actual gallery based exhibition. The project worked as an exploration of the networking opportunities made possible by internet technologies – within the structure of the project the physical exchange of art works was accompanied by the exchange of images, ideas and discussion in the virtual domain.

As a virtual structure it seems that the internet itself knows no bounds, it is forever in a state of constant expansion. And, perhaps this is the most useful way to consider the potential it offers artist run projects. Rather than simply advocating methods that artist run projects can employ it is my intention in invoking the above examples to hint towards possibilities inherent in the form of the internet. The challenge for artist run spaces is to identify ways in which the internet can be employed to complement and expand upon their existing activities. While exact forms and processes that engender this are ultimately negotiable the possibility clearly exists for other types of web presence. Rather than simply relying on static models of web presence which have been inherited from the tradition of print based publishing a real potential exists for the formation and promotion of more participatory structures that utilise the networked space of the web as a space for exchange and creation.

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¹ JJ King, Terror is a Network - and the Network is You. Mute, issue 23 March 2002
(www.metamute.com)

² <http://www.theyrule.net>

³ Space Traffic was a symposium and publishing project undertaken by West Space Melbourne and Parrasite Hong Kong in 2001/2002 The subtitle to the project was “artist-run spaces beyond a local context”. For more details see <http://www.westspace.org.au> and <http://www.para-site.org.hk>

⁴ <http://aaeol.ca/>

⁵ <http://www.front.bc.ca/>

⁶ <http://www.adistilery.org.uk>

⁷ <http://www.westspace.org.au>