



Paul Yore *Playdough's Cave* 2012 (installation view) at The Atrium, Federation Square, Melbourne. A play on Plato's Cave and this interactive installation encouraged the audience to make playdough contributions to the artist's evolving habitat. Photo: Greg Bricknell.



boat-people.org *Muffled Protest* 2010 (video still) shown on The Big Screen at the Main Stage, Federation Square. Photo: Devika Bilmoria.

# MANIFESTATIONS OF NOW

Sapna Chandu

## Experimenting with strategy

Talking strategy is not sexy, or seductive, or mystical in the way a romanticising conception of art supposes: immediate, spontaneous, lose-yourself-in-the-moment of art making. Strategy does, however, convey a sense of purpose and ambition – an undeniable part of art.

It's clear that the art market is a well-serviced machine. This slick operation, managed by consultants, curators, writers, collectors, gallerists and institutions, strategically trades and markets art so it may "speak for itself". Bustling at the fringes are the enterprising, self-determining and self-empowering Artist Run Initiatives (ARIs). Ideally independent of institutional bureaucracy and with free-range form and

content, ARIs have great potential to be agents of change – a source of new creative inspiration to the wider community. But can ARIs be heard through the cacophony of voices (commercial, creative, political) all vying for public interest? Limited by both budget and human resource, can unrepresented art collectives compete with established organisations to promote new ideas to a broad cross-section of society? Can the strategic engagement of institutions be a way in which ARIs can make their work socially competitive without slipping into the realm of rebellious activism?

### MoNOW (Manifestations of NOW)

MoNOW, the inaugural exhibition by Weaustralians.org confronted some of these pressing concerns. In this instance,

the Melbourne-based ARI actively experimented with the use of institutionally controlled spaces (to ambitiously promote the diversity of contemporary art practice), while attempting to protect the very freedoms that make ARIs fluid and free of institutional limitations.

### Weaustralians.org

Established in 2010, Weaustralians.org formed around the provocation for the exhibition – its pretext being that the contemporary Australian art platform should challenge mainstream representations of Australian identity. The ARI attracted a variety of like-minded creatives with the goal to develop an exhibition, rather than manage a specific physical site such as a gallery space. This exhibition called for an inclusive contemporary art platform, reflecting Australia's cosmopolitan culture by presenting art that inspired new ways of seeing contemporary Australian identity, and the identity of the contemporary Australian artist. The exhibiting artists came from around the country, and from diverse art practices and cultural backgrounds. At a time when Australia's international reputation was being exposed as racist, xenophobic and discriminatory, Australian identity was a topical conversation that demanded the engagement of both arts and wider communities.

### Dynamic Range – the parameters of the experiment

The method we settled on required significant numbers of artists from diverse cultural heritages in order to legitimately

reflect the eclectic makeup of Australians. Similarly, the exhibiting artists' work needed recognition by their peers. The venue needed to have a high profile so as to be easily accessed by the non-arts community, yet also be suitably edgy to attract the buy-in of the art crowd. The agency of the exhibition as a whole needed to re-propose the politics of representation and self-empowerment – rather than just critique the dominant structures or reverse the binary oppositions that underlie stereotypes and socio-cultural hierarchies – and do so in an inclusive manner to engage the wider community. Our project demanded honest dialogue about conflict and progress embedded in the richness of our present day culture. Its conceptual parameters denied the use of limiting terms such as 'multicultural art' or 'community art', terms often used to distinguish forms of culture other than 'contemporary art'.

### The Result

Within a short period, it became clear that the initial idea of a renegade production in a pop-up space would not support our constitutional challenge. We needed the advantages that institutions could offer. Originally proposed as a group exhibition in a single venue, the multidisciplinary exhibition evolved into a much higher profile mini-festival at Federation Square in Melbourne. *MoNOW (Manifestations of NOW)* was presented from 7–27 April 2012, and showcased eighteen artists' from around Australia. Artworks and installations were staged at NGV Studio, No Vacancy Project Space,

Federation Square's Atrium and Fracture Gallery, and video artworks were shown on The Big Screen. The program of events also included a public forum, *The role of art in 21st century Australia*, chaired by Nikos Papastergiadis, with Peter Tyndal and Hossein Valamanesh on the panel.

### Strategic Engagement

There were many advantages to staging an exhibition in the iconic centre of Melbourne and in association with established institutions such as the National Gallery of Victoria and Federation Square. We gained invaluable support from their highly experienced teams and access to their industry and media networks, not to mention other in-kind support. Weaustrians.org could also leverage the high status of the establishments to further attract the sponsorship of essential services and materials. The production of *MoNOW* made me realise that collaborations between independent ARIs and art or government institutions could provide a mutually beneficial and legitimate platform for the dissemination of progressive ideas – but not without risks.

### Negotiation Space

Visions of a multi-venue layout developed from our ambition for significant exposure. This idea manifested through the exhibition's growth into public spaces, however securing these spaces (and venues) was an intense and difficult process. Only once No Vacancy Project Space was confirmed could we approach Federation Square, and then NGV Studio. The negotiations were endless and at times questioned the independence and self-directed nature of our work. One organisation left our exhibition dates in limbo until the very last moment, with sites unconfirmed until a few days before the day we opened, and in the end, abandoned our agreed schedule for video content with commercial interests taking priority. At another venue, we were engaged in diplomatic negotiations on installation day with the threat of censorship of a specific artwork's content because of the effect it might have on patrons – a work that had been shown several times in Australia and around the world. At times it was even necessary to re-negotiate the ownership of the project.

### Breaking the language barrier

Aware that the creative process requires the right mix of serendipity, intellect, research, transcendence, and a compelling use of words, our negotiations continued into the less tangible space of discourse. Beginning a new conversation about identity required strategic rehabilitation of the sentiment lingering around the use of out-dated terms. "Multiculturalism is dead" was the verdict written into history

when German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated in 2011 that, "multiculturalism has utterly failed". Other world leaders, including British PM David Cameron and former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, shared the sentiment in separate speeches that same year.

With this death sentence in mind, the working title of the exhibition evolved from *Weaustrians (Perspectives)*, to *MoNOW (Manifestations of NOW)*. *MoNOW* was both strategically inclusive and contemporary, in the 'Mo' tradition of art institutions (see MoMA). We promoted a discursive space that spoke about 'manifestations' (those tangible physical things that creativity becomes), as well as the cultural consciousness that both influences and is influenced by art. The exhibition aim was a cosmopolitan articulation of identity and culture, expressed in the vernacular. The public description of our project specifically refrained from using the "multicultural" word that was only exhumed in applications to specific institutions to meet dogmatic criteria.

### Exhuming the remains

Conscious that creativity feeds the soul, but funding feeds creativity, we applied a semiotic strategy in an attempt to be competitive in institutional funding rounds, although at times our use of language in applications pushed the integrity of the project and our objectives. During consultations with state and national funding bodies, we proudly highlighted our "artists from diverse cultural heritages" and were swiftly pointed towards the multicultural funding bodies – even though "cultural diversity" was apparently a mainstream concept. On the other hand, we were told that *MoNOW*, as a visual arts exhibition, did not fit the criteria attached to "multicultural arts" grants, and were referred back to mainstream arts funding bodies. It became clear that our project was contesting the deeply embedded status quo of bureaucratic structures, so we were forced to repackage ourselves. We had no choice but to enter the system of categorisation, so we developed several versions of the project, all of which were no more than re-articulations based on specific funding criteria.

### Remodel

That so many contemporary collectives exist around the world is a great sign of motivation and empowerment for a profession that rarely receives economic reward for work. With a global community of ARIs manifesting a constant stream of projects, and collectives working directly with communities, there may well be a contemporary art movement effecting social change that will only ever be appreciated in retrospect.



Dario Vacirca *Cult of Old Regret part 1 of Trunk Opera 2012* (detail of interactive installation, in use). Exhibited in The Fracture Gallery, Federation Square. Photo: Devika Bilmoria.

The historical contest of creative control versus patronage persists in the contemporary art world but does not have to be seen as 'a dance with the devil'. If artists develop a greater understanding of institutional models, through experiments in collaboration, independent research and volunteering at established organisations, ARIs may develop creative strategies to piggyback off institutions' considerable resources for relevant projects, while still maintaining their artistic integrity. ■

Sapna Chandu is the founder of weaustrians.org.

1. The exhibiting artists and collectives were: Monika Behrens, boat-people.org, Jessie Boylan, Brown Council, Sapna Chandu, Bindi Cole, Eva Fernandez, Ann Fuata, Jane Korman, Keith Lim, MISO, Paula do Prado, Ryan Presley, Roberta Rich, Carl Scrase, Dario Vacirca, Paul Yore, Michael Warnock, and ZHEN.



RIGHT: Roberta Rich *Lesson 5: Aussie Rules 2012*, from the Lesson Series (installation view), 4 channel video installation. An absurd militia football-esque training performance exhibited at No Vacancy Project Space, Federation Square. Photo: Devika Bilmoria.



*The Role of Art in 21st Century Australia*, documentation of MoNOW Public Forum held at NGV Studio, 19 April 2012. Photo: Devika Bilmoria. All other photos Greg Bricknell.



Dario Vacirca artist talk on *The Cult of Old Regret*, at The Fracture Gallery, Federation Square.



Bindi Cole artist talk on the photographic series *Not Really Aboriginal 2008* at NGV Studio.



Deborah Kelly from boat-people.org artist talk on *Muffled Protest 2010*.



Jane Korman, artist talk on *Dancing Auschwitz 2010*, a 3 part video installation exhibited at NGV Studio.



Lively audience engagement at forum event.