

Wanna be in my Gang? When artist-led can become art mis-read.

Dominic Thomas discusses in his earlier editorial¹ on this site that artists can come together to for a variety of reasons; opportunity to exhibit, political motivation, security, peer support, a fun evening out, part of a socially cohesive network that is facilitated and made easier by online activity; email, social networking sites. Yet whether it is a get-together over a drink or a planned meeting to discuss a fledgling project, there is a unique potential for a mutual understanding, a sympathetic ear, swapping the latest news and running ideas passed each other. Becky Shaw², in a VAGA³ presentation at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 2006, outlines the importance of these places to exist, the places where artists draw together to enable them to learn their trade and ultimately, become better artists. Groups of artists working together makes sense, creating a focal point to present themselves to the world, shape themselves to suit their needs and engage with an audience; within this sphere anything, and everything seems possible.

In a perfect world the agenda of the group is explicit to the participants, and how the group might progress and develop is largely shaped by what can be agreed and rationalised. The choices might range from what pub to meet in, who else to involve, seeking to rent property, or to raise funds. The details and specifics can change, but in terms of the temporal and precarious nature of the inter-personal relationships nothing can be taken for granted. The blurring between professional and personal relationships is complex and something as simple as everyone attending meetings at the same time can be an achievement.

I am not able to describe a perfect formula, a list of dos and don'ts of how artist-led groups can work. This list would eventually fail, as each group's individual circumstance is unique and for every right answer there is a wrong one. I am also not talking about collaboration, or at least not in a specific sense, but artists working together to make and present work. What I want to examine is the motivations and attractions for artists drawn to working together in this way, along with the risks and advantages. Why does the space taken up by artist-led culture seem so radical and viable yet in reality has as many pitfalls as any other path an artist might take?

¹ Dominic Thomas "The Rise of the Artist-Led Group-an Administrative Practice?"
<http://www.aliasarts.org/aboutaliaseditorial.htm>

² Becky Shaw - http://www.vaga.co.uk/index.php?main_section=64&textentryid=257

³ Visual Artists and Galleries Association

So, we have a group of creative practitioners with the will and commitment to move forward. Here is a real danger that the process of meeting, socialising and networking becomes enough, a safety in numbers and the group is an end in itself. This might be sufficient for some, it being enough to simply be supporting each other, but it lacks the potential to fully realise a group's ability to be a productive engaging model for the participants and audience alike.

The members of any given group are made up of a varied mix of bureaucratic abilities, grand plans and potential ideas, mixed with a delicate balance of personalities, commitment, direction and drive needed to make the group function. This is where the greatest challenge to the group exists, how to move forward after the initial flush of enthusiasm, often following a debut success. This is the time for crucial questions, such as, what are the significant issues for the group? What dialogue does the group wish to focus on? In what wider context does the group wish to place themselves? Full agreement will not always be possible and it is often that a compromise will need to be sought.

If the aim were just to make an artist-led group, then in theory there is no conflict as an artist-led group can also be a means, as well as an end. Artist-led does not in itself mean good art or good artists, or artists making good work. It is possible to argue that a lot of artist-led activity loses focus in the process of its own existence. This can easily happen as the individual members become immersed in their roles within the group and the visibility, sociability and support that it offers. However in this instance the group becomes a professional development facilitator rather than a producer of art and we return to the crucial question what is the aim of the group?

Artist-led as a term, has a contemporary inference as a description, one which never really succeeds as a good description. It has, to some, come to mean artists taking a risk; working outside the system, off-site, context based, self-organised, the associations meaning good, heroic and enabling. In discussions and meetings with organisations, the term artist-led is bandied around, seen as a radical and edgy practice that can add relevance for development of a project or programme of activities. Does the act of being artist-led become more than the sum of its parts? So what is the relevance or necessity of artist-led activity in this hyper-connected fluid socially networked environment that now exists? Is a democratically structured group necessary? Is the term artist-led lazy shorthand for a type of idealised radical position, with some ethical butter applied? Could it then be adopted as a style, a posture or be described as a type of work?

Dominic Thomas argues that artist-led activity is attractive to policy makers and economically wise agencies where the criteria of engagement with a local and national community are satisfied in one fiscal move. What it is that groups do to compound this state? Are they simply fulfilling the roles presented to them or are they through self-deterministic development, gathering funders and fiscally enabling them to make work? Either way the group will need to be aware of its attractiveness as a model of engagement, a potential short cut for an external agency to an audience that normally might be hard to pin down and have access to.

The proposition of artist-led would suggest self-management and a democratic structure that allows individuals to be heard and have effect within the group. Here projects get imagined and developed around a kitchen or pub table or desk, with a natural inclination to be fair and even-handed, there is no talk of contracts, liability or responsibility, unless the group perversely wants to develop the structure before the content, running before walking as it were. This grouping is of individuals who are brought together by the practicalities of involving known quantities. The realities of art production, the investment of time and money (actual or in kind), makes necessary a reliance on those that have or are known to have delivered good work on time without too much fuss. The activities and commitments that are involved and interruptions that occur when maintaining a practice is at odds with a sensible working process, with long hours and haphazard financial security, but fits into the model that many artists adopt in their survival by juggling a multitude of jobs and projects. With this in mind it is common to find groups comprised of artists who have previously shown together, share a connection in their studio practice or are friends. It is an expedient model of production in a precarious world where opportunities and breakthroughs are haphazard and uncertain, and yield benefits, be they actual or simply social capital amongst peers. Artists are egocentric by the nature of art production, even those that retreat from the being omnipresent and visible in the work, they are still a producer. The larger ego of the group is no different; needing managed and maintained, a well-balanced democracy or an acquiesced autocracy. The success or failure of the group will rely on recognition of this.

The time (which is money) spent developing a project will never really be paid back, in the same way a salary would, but in this lies the implications of worth, value and commerce. Without the fiscal support that a more developed or recognised organisation brings in, the startup artist-led project, will have to rely on the good will, mutual respect and trust between those involved as previously outlined, a form of productive capital between the participants. This might complicate matters when attempting to apply a critical framework to what has

been produced or presented and how, without wanting to appear mean. It is tough to apply critique when so much enthusiasm is swilling around, or is it?

The first instinct is to support and encourage the endeavors of artists forging forward and organising themselves into a cohesive form, regardless of what is produced. It is not a given that artist-led is good. So when is it relevant to what is presented to the world is made by self-led artists? Should the critical framework come from the historical precedent of artist-led activity or through appraisal and critique that is applied to artwork or projects more generally? This might lead to a discussion about the context of the viewer, their own position, the flight or train they have just taken, to get to the artwork or indeed their own vested interest in what they are seeing. Do they need to know that what they are looking or engaging with has come through artist-led endeavor? Will this be apparent in how the work is made and presented? Does it need to be? This begs the question, what is more important, the artist group that makes work or the work made by the artist group?

As models go, artist-led is not a new or particularly innovative model of practices for artists. During the politicised times of the 60's and 70's artist groups took up a radical position and offered a space to examine and challenge the world around them, the events that took place were the 'art'⁴. Major art intuitions or organisations including the Royal Academy⁵ and The Vienna Succession⁶, can be traced back to practitioners coming together at some time or another to try and make things better or easier for themselves and their colleagues. Eventually, like all self-organising systems, they have a tendency to become more ordered and structured to the point when, what might have been an unbridled fluid dynamic group that knows itself, becomes an answerable concern that has structures, trajectories and targets. While at the same time seeking to address through funding requirements or sponsorship what still might be a dynamic programme, but tempered by the organisations needs. There is not tension between these two positions but some fundamental issues are pertinent. Shaw states:

But what artist-led organisations can do and what good art organisations can do, irrespective of who they are led by, is to be critical and knowledgeable about what validation means and to reflect on their own role in that.⁷

⁴ Alan Kaprow's 'Happenings' or Gordon Matta-Clarks 'Food'

⁵ The Royal Academy was formed to rival the Society of Artists. James Paine used his strong connections with King George III to create a new artistic body, the Royal Academy, in 1768. It was formally launched the following year.

⁶ The Vienna Secession (also known as *the Union of Austrian Artists*, or *Vereinigung Bildender Künstler Österreichs*) was formed in 1897 by a group of Austrian artists housed in the Vienna Künstlerhaus. This movement included painters, sculptors, and architects.

⁷ See 2

Dave Beech in a recent discussion regarding artists' relation to a public audience, as well as Gordon Dalton in 'The Future of Artist-Led Activity'⁸ states this as an imperative for artists to realistically challenge the structures that artists have to operate within, and that would include the group as well as the space it inhabits, be it off-site, gallery, art fair or other. How does this artist-led process, if such a thing can exist, avoid slipping into a parody of the institutions they might be seeking to subvert and challenge? Institutional denial is as much a possible stance for artist-led groups as not. There is a need to move away from the model of the worthy, and dispel the idea that artist-led culture should naturally inherit the mantle of the being radical or challenging. Indeed, work that comes out of artist-led activity can be as staid and unchallenging as any other organisation can produce through its own programme. Most of the time it makes good sense and is ultimately practical for practitioners to come together and share skills and support, but this does not mean what will be produced has to also be 'good', and as Dalton reminds us this can be a self serving vortex that might be difficult to break out of.

So where does this leave artist-led activity? Artists have an opportunity to reinvent when and how they come together; creating heat and momentum that develops into a project, a space that can incubate and support, creating a challenging environment that increases the critical debate around art and its production. This activity might have a certain caché; a frisson that at once is exciting but can also be binding and reductive through its own limitations. Here we come to the risk at the heart of artist-led culture, how to sustain the momentum and the dynamism without becoming immersed in the rituals of organisation, becoming a closed shop for new artists, or a bureaucratic process that works against a groups potential.

In the natural life cycle of an artist group such as this there are a number of points of challenge that will invariably take place. While, as mentioned, in the first instance there might be a democracy or equitable mutual process, commitments change and a pragmatic structure might develop to allow the project to continue, the group then adjusts its workings to suit the changes, dealing with its new reality. Transmission Gallery⁹ and Catalyst Arts¹⁰ maintain a rigor within their organisations by each member of the committee serving for up to two years only. This is recognition of the needs of the group to regenerate, allowing new blood in. This

⁸ <http://www.aliasarts.org/GordonDalton.htm>

⁹ Transmission was set up in 1983 by graduates from Glasgow School of Art who were dissatisfied with the lack of exhibition spaces and opportunities for young artists in Glasgow - <http://www.transmissiongallery.org/history>

¹⁰ Catalyst is Belfast's primary artist-led organisation, it is non-profit and a members-based organisation, A directorship lasts two years only, in order to ensure Catalyst remains vibrant with new energy - <http://www.catalystarts.org.uk/index.php?page=history>

must be applauded. Taken into context this can act as the antidote, an alternative democracy when in reality there is little difference between their working model and the bureaucratic process of a small organisation. So the artist-led becomes the artist-led with a director, chair, secretary and treasurer, a mini institution in all but name is emerging, albeit a healthy one.

The production of artist-led activity does not have to be limited, reproduce or mimic what takes place in other arts organisations or groups to work. There are some successful and viable groups that operate efficiently, that now have a history and viability, through a mix of bureaucratic process and imaginative practice. What seems to be necessary is the intellectual proposition of the participants to maintain and regulate the activities, and in that guard against slipping into becoming a self-serving clique as mentioned previously. Like any successful mix, the different parts needs to allow for the right amount of ambition, drive, evolution and rigor that supports the individuals yet enables them to make good critical work, and with enough foresight and awareness to know when to call it a day, or at least allow the next generation of artist to inherit and take ownership from the previous incumbents.

This is not necessarily an active call to move to the radical position that artist groups can inhabit, but the enquiry and questioning that takes place can yield results. The questions that need to be asked are how can we realise the potential of artists coming together to produce work and what is the next evolution of this? What is the next essential move if a move is necessary? If artist-led needs to be less of a habit and more of a process, how do we do it well? There seems to be a need for the critical appraisal that is ambitious and as challenging as the work that artists produce, and not simply reduce the argument to white cube vs. DIY, missing the many shades and issues in between. As Andrew Wilson states when describing the history of the artist-led space City Racing:

Art history of the twentieth century is in many respects the repetitive story of one generation's avant-garde becoming the mainstreams next orthodoxy.¹¹

Is it time to discard the description of works as artist-led as being anachronistic or at least limiting, or to take the term or description under advisement? Can we accept that what is in front of the viewer is still artwork, that it will sit amongst the pantheon of artistic production,

¹¹ City Racing - The Life and Times of an Artist Run Gallery' by Andrew Wilson in his forward

being part of a stream that sits in its historical context, and that the work made, rather than the endeavor, is placed front and centre to stand or fall? Can we have both?

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This text was commissioned by Alias as part of their ongoing dialogue regarding artist-led activity in the South West of England.

Links:

<http://www.aliasarts.org/artistledrisk.htm>

<http://www.stevenpaige.com>