

Preface I

When Gwyn and Dan invited us to guest edit the Sydney section for this issue of Natural Selection, Liz and I sat down and had a long conversation about the proposition. In thinking through who we might ask to contribute a piece of writing (for we at first concentrated on the fact that Natural Selection in its past guises has been pretty much a text based affair) we discussed various agendas that were operating in the art world, and who might contribute something.

Did we want to ask one group for a polemic about their quest to get better artist fees from institutions? I couldn't really see the point in this, as I don't really agree with the idea that better artists fees from institutions would make any difference at all to the situation of artists. Their protest misses the point that exhibiting in such spaces is a privileged position that many people won't ever occupy. And seeking bigger fees for doing so fails to address that these institutions are increasingly becoming leaden with bureaucracy, driven by their marketing departments, and conservative in their approach. It also misses a point made by Daniel Malone to Gwyn, (and cited in one of her recent essays) – that artists and institutions are codependent, but that artists are endlessly replenishable.

Liz and I discussed how dire writing on the Sydney art scene has become, particularly in the mainstream press (see my review of the reviewers below). In fact we got pretty depressed about the whole idea of collating anything at all.

Then we thought about our friends and colleagues, who, in the face of all these obstacles – limited spaces to exhibit in, little time and money to create work, virtually no 'commercial market' for their 'product' – continue to make exciting and inspirational work. We decided to throw open our editorial arms and invite some people who we know and admire to contribute anything they wanted. The result is almost like a group show, except we don't have any curatorial rationale in operation... Just a bunch of pages that we hope someone somewhere finds as intriguing,

confounding, hilarious and inspiring as we do.

Reviewing the Reviewers

The best recent mainstream coverage of contemporary art came from Anne Loxley, who wrote for about a year for the Sydney Morning Herald on every second Tuesday. She pulled no punches – criticising sloppy work, questioning the curatorial rationale of institutions such as the MCA, and pointing out the increasingly market driven nature of the Sydney gallery system. Little wonder the Herald discontinued her column, and it's interesting that this occurred following a couple of particularly scathing reviews of certain 'blue-chip' galleries and institutions. The reasons given to Loxley for her discontinuation by the arts editor Bryce Hallet were "a change of direction for the reader", and "budgetary constraints". Increasingly the newspaper coverage of contemporary art in Sydney is thinly veiled advertorial.

The main art writer for the Sydney Morning Herald (filling the big shoes left by the infamous John McDonald) is Peter Hill, who is also an artist. Whereas the conservative McDonald was openly hostile to much contemporary art, Hill writes little in the way of critical responses to work. Often he will interview the artists over a latte, or regurgitate press releases/essays that accompany the exhibition (commissioned by the artist or gallery, and thus never critical of the work). He even liked the Affordable Art Fair (which would have to be one of the most deplorable, problematic recent developments in the Sydney 'Art Market'). Perhaps he's afraid of the reaction if he takes a critical stance. Perhaps he's just a nice guy. Either way, it's boring, unhelpful and often just stupid.

The best coverage of the Sydney art scene at the moment comes via an anonymous blog (www.artlife.blogspot.com), a diary that can be as celebratory or as cutting as it likes thanks to its anonymity. It's refreshingly honest, one of the only published voices currently keeping a critical and intelligent eye on things.

Preface II

In Sydney today, there seems to be a much smaller amount of publicly available, critical, interesting writing on art than there was, say, ten years ago. Newspapers don't contain much in the way of art criticism, and a common approach to the art writing that is in their pages is that of the 'listing' style – exhibitions are wrapped up in a paragraph or two of descriptive writing, under some sort of 'things to do in Sydney today' heading.

It also seems there has been a corresponding increase in the number of artist-run publications and websites. This may be a result of the lack of more mainstream publishing arenas for art discussion or criticism. It could also be the result of the changing nature of art 'practice' – the fact that creating and exhibiting art is not necessarily the sum total of what it means to be an artist these days.

The increase in artist-run publications has resulted in an increase in requests to artists from other artists, to make written contributions to their projects. Do artists make good critics? Do they make good writers? Some do, and some don't. As artists, anything they have to say about art (their own or others') is surely

valid – but it may not be interestingly written. If something is badly written, it won't hold anyone's attention for long, and it's difficult to commission good writing when there isn't any money available to commission with.

It's so hard to sit down and write something good – the process can be terrifying. Staring at a computer screen and waiting for a profound comment (or essay) to make its way from scattered thoughts to orderly consciousness is not fun. It's so easy to give up, and think, 'oh well...I didn't make it to contribute to publication 'X' this time, maybe I can do something for the next issue'. Procrastination is easier, as is walking away from the project completely to do something else, like colour in, or play Playstation.

Here, in our contribution from Sydney for Natural Selection Issue #3, we have picked some artists we know and love, and asked them to contribute anything – written or visual – for publication. The results have been very little in the way of writing, but a lot of interesting visual work. Hopefully this gives some indication of what it is to be an artist in Sydney.