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The North and South of Contemporary Art Spaces in New Zealand

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CIRCUIT

NEW ZEALAND THE NORTH AND SOUTH OF CONTEMPORARY ART SPACES IN NEW ZEALAND



Marcus Williams and Eugene Hansen, *Filter*, 1999. Paintings on wood, sound, video (detail).
Presented at the Physics Room, Christchurch, New Zealand.

New Zealand is a strangely beguiling country for many reasons. One of those reasons has simply to do with its radically altering geographical make-up – from city to glaciers, rain forests, fjords and onto another city in the space of a couple of hours drive. A friend once told me after visiting that if there was a god and it constructed the world then New Zealand was the maquette, which was then expanded to help produce the final realisation.

Split into two islands – the North and South Island respectively, the capricious nature of the landscape between cities on the two islands reflects the individuality of New Zealand's urban centres and more pointedly the art scenes which exist in the five most culturally active conurbations. Small in size but all the more vital for it, the gallery cultures of Auckland, Hamilton and Wellington on the North Island and Christchurch and Dunedin on the South Island are fairly autonomous with regards to institutional structure. Thus there is no countrywide lateral funding policy, union or collective remit to speak of, as seen in

Canada or European countries such as Holland or Germany. For these reasons it renders each city as its own cultural creator in terms of identity politics and PR exercises within the arts.

With specific regard to Canadian artists run centres this is interesting inasmuch as it is antithetical to the model currently employed by countries such as Canada. Whilst Canada enjoys a country wide artist run gallery system heavily subsidised by the government, often through at least two levels of state and national funding, it also leads to a certain homogeneity of locations and remits. Thus the artist-run white cube and its expectations in Toronto could be that of Montreal which in turn could be that of Vancouver. In reality, this is a small price to pay in terms of support when considering that there are only really two artist-run spaces in New Zealand which receive annual funding. There are other spaces which receive funding on a project basis, which tends to mean that the curatorial policy can be more flexible and contingently active but they do the paperwork/grant applying to pay for it.



Steve Carr, *Boganné*, 1998. Mixed media installation. Basement of old Blue Oyster Gallery.

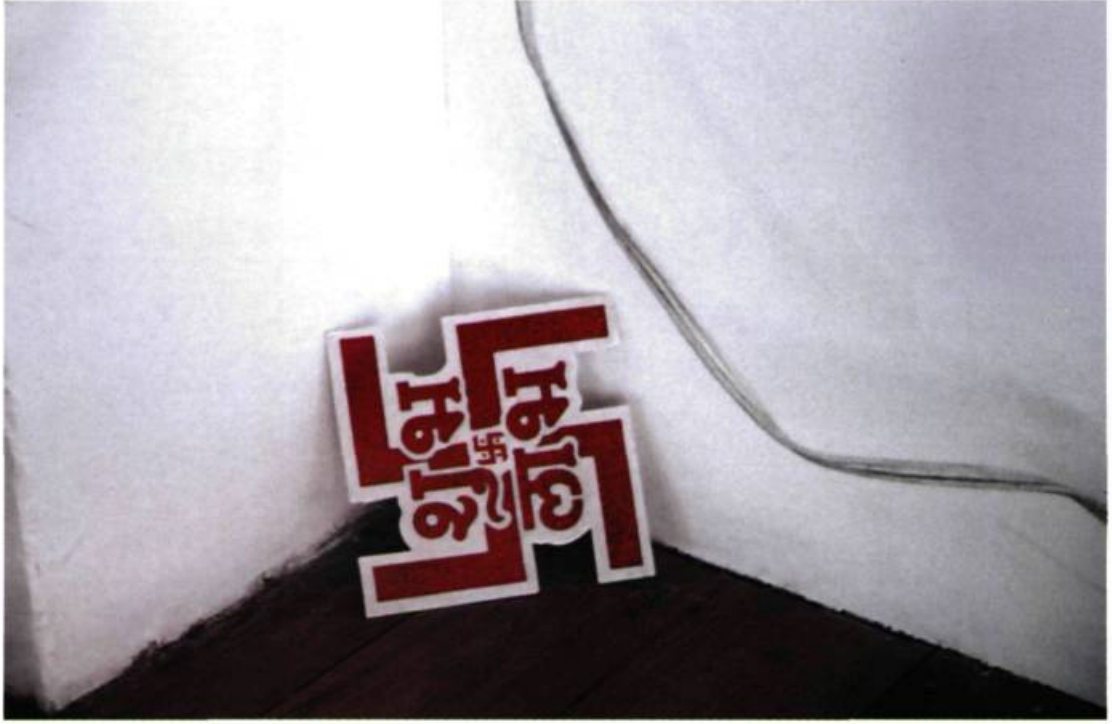
What this means in retrospect is that artist run culture in New Zealand is city specific. There is no rule or expectation to carry from city to city which makes for a set of more idiosyncratic cultural economies. There are distinct relations and exchanges however between galleries in for example, Dunedin and Christchurch. Gallery directors and curators as most places in the world are expected to be disarmingly introspective yet bureaucratically flirtatious with respect to attaining beneficial links with possible philanthropic patrons, media and other galleries. So they are in New Zealand but not as often as you might expect with such a small circuit. This can be viewed as a healthy outlook as it guards against an incestuous circling of the same cultural producers but at the same time does nothing to strengthen the possible allegiances and strategies of under-funded spaces which struggle to meet the rent.

As stated above there are five centres of activity in New Zealand with relation to gallery activity and support for off-site activities such as web projects, urban intervention work in cinemas and shops for example, billboard work and the plethora of other critical sites and tools utilised to produce critical analysis.

What follows is a brief overview of a range of more active and pivotal galleries which are funded (and some which are not) and are therefore not what one might call “commercial”.

Auckland being the largest city on the North Island houses Artspace which shows more established and high-profile practitioners in the visual and sound arts, with exhibitions from the likes of the UK’s Richard Billingham and the US’s Matthew Barney over the past year, it enjoys a wide ranging interest from national and international practitioners and has the financial pull to bring the latter variety to their shores.

The most active space for emerging artists and maybe practitioners who want more of a challenge than the white cube scenario comes in the shape of Room Three. As a collective of artists who saw the need for a contemporary artspace in the city for as yet unestablished workers, it provides a cheap rentable space which the directors oversee and sit. Through its policy to show cutting-edge conceptual work such as Mitch Robertson from Canada who showed in the space, in February, and the energy, commitment and necessary groundwork done by its members,



Daniel Malone and AD Schiering, *Über Alles*, 1999. Installation/mixed media/performance (detail).
Presented at the Physics Room, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Room Three has gained a deserved fledgling national reputation as a rigorous and challenging gallery.

Travelling 80 miles in a southerly direction down the North Island, Hamilton has a population of 300,000 and is one of the smallest cities in New Zealand. Its main destination outside of the local art museum to witness contemporary art is at the Ramp Gallery which is a Polytechnic gallery. One might think that the most aware and conceptually savvy art, sound and theory courses would hail from Auckland, yet Waikato Polytechnic in Hamilton offers leading light pedagogical standards and a forward thinking space in the Ramp Gallery. Different by university standards in that there are no anachronistic allegiances to airing a collection (a majority of educational institutions, especially universities harbouring conceptually dry and conservative art hoards in their back rooms.)

The curators of the gallery who also teach in the artschool accept proposals through all media and offer a rent free space with support from the university for mailouts, invitations and openings.

At the very southern tip of the North Island is Wellington and with its busy trade in young international

travellers one would be forgiven for thinking that it would have a more active artist-run scene than other cities in New Zealand. This is not really the case however and instead Wellington relies on the recently constructed university gallery The Adam Art Gallery to supply the city with contemporary work.

The gallery space itself is unconventional for a university gallery in an architectural sense. There are half-a-dozen spaces to exhibit in of which only one is of the white cube formula. The other spaces such as the stairwell space or high walled, wide corridor space offer difficult and thus more demanding sites in which to produce work. This is probably why they invited Joseph Kosuth in March to install one of his text based pieces around the ample room of the aforementioned 20 metre high walled space.

Being university funded amongst other sources means that they can mount ambitious projects with good documentation through catalogues etc. Whilst showing established artists such as Kosuth, they also curate unknown artists and will accept proposals for projects at the gallery which range from sound-work through multi-media and more traditional artforms such as painting, prints etc.

Onto the South Island and mid-east coast resides Christchurch. Home to The Physics Room Gallery the only South Island artist-run space to receive annual funding from the government via Creative New Zealand. Housed on the second floor of a pristine art deco building, it has wooden floors and is split into a main room and a smaller project based space. The youthfulness and enthusiasm of the director and volunteers who help out at the gallery means that they are committedly active and determined to install works as the artist deems. Irrelevant of the changes which need making to the space, the work is treated as the prominent issue which is a welcomed change from the precious nature of many gallery personnel. The Physics Room is one of the most established artist-run centres in New Zealand and definitely one of the most highly regarded and internationally known. Showing Australian artists on a regular basis, they are currently working on a project which sees artist-run centres from Australia, Singapore, China and New Zealand collaborate on an exchange program. Connected to The Physics Room although autonomous is the magazine called *Log Illustrated* which is published every 4 months. A good journal, well designed and conceptually tight, it is New Zealand's most critical and compelling cultural journal.

Also resident in Christchurch is the even older artist-run space the High Street Project which has in the past fostered a more lo-fi ideology yet a similarly tight conceptual rigour in its exhibiting policy. Artists such as Ross Sinclair from Scotland have shown work there and his work is a good pointer as to the type of conceptual work shown most often in the space. Housed in an office/home environment in the city, the spaces High Street Projects move to on a fairly regular basis do not reflect the pristine environment of the white cube which often means the projects undertaken in the space have to understand and have a dialogue with the location to make them work. It's always a positive occurrence to see a gallery making the artist consider the architecture, history and function of the space they work in.

Dunedin is a four-hour drive down the coast from Christchurch and maybe surprisingly has the contemporary and forward-thinking Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Presently it is undergoing major public questioning of its curatorial policy as to the Directors credit they have opted to exhibit and publicise a full program of what has been deemed by the city as "cutting edge" work. The controversy resides however in the fact that the "public" appears to want to view the collection; hence painting and pedestal-based sculpture. Currently showing is a retrospective of the work of Ralph Hotere which features his collaborative installations with Bill Culbert. The obscurely named Blue Oyster Gallery is the most active artist-run space in Dunedin. Having recently moved sight to a large wooden floored space in the city, this is another committed space to turning out work by unestablished and mid-career artists both national and international.

In their words they felt that it was important "that a new arts space was provided, due to the closure of three of Dunedin's major community art galleries – The Honey-moon Suite, Everything Incorporated and Bond Street Galleries". The Blue Oyster has links with both The Physics Room and the High Street Project and being a fairly new gallery is looking to initiate projects which can further its chances of being funded which means it can undertake more ambitious projects in the future.

Given that New Zealand's cultural community resides in Europe and USA/Canada as much as it does in Australia, its relative geographical isolation renders it self-sufficient but also reflective of more developed artistic cultures overseas. It also means the arts community in general is very open and welcoming in a critical manner to theory, artists and initiatives whilst concurrently concentrating and focusing on an economy of ideas pertinent to their own culture.

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