

Radically Affirmative

Since 2006 Match Box Projects has grown far beyond its two creators, Leanne and Naomi Shedlezki. In some ways it is difficult to describe what Match Box Projects has become because it fits uneasily within established modes of art production and display. For me, the idea that most closely describes Match Box Projects is what Bruce Barber calls 'Littoral Art'.¹ In Barber's words, "Littoral describes the intermediate and shifting zone between the sea and the land and refers metaphorically to cultural projects that are undertaken outside the conventional contexts of the institutionalized artworld."² As Barber conceives it, Littoral Art is political, because "public, community based art is essentially political", however, it is not necessarily overtly so.³ The very act of connecting people through art, in an affirmative gesture of friendship, is radical.

It's important to realise here that Match Box Projects, as with other Littoral Art projects, is not simply an instrumentalist approach to art. That is, the art here is not simply an instrument that enables the social dimension. This is *not* a community arts project or a kind of social art therapy, in which the artistic outcomes are secondary. For Match Box Projects the art is central and collaborators include Imants Tillers, Janet Laurence, Martin Sharp, Ruark Lewis, Jasper Knight, Mimi Tong and Half Dozen.

Collaboration is the core of Match Box Projects, and this has recently extended to include the map of artist-run initiatives (ARIs) in inner-city Sydney. ARIs are, according to one authoritative definition, "primarily exhibition spaces, sometimes incorporating studio spaces, run by a collective of practising artists and ranging from part-time short-term projects to long established legal entities."⁴ ARIs can be as diverse as organisations like First Draft, which runs on a sustainable business model, to unofficial loose collaborations of artists in illegal squats and abandoned buildings that disappear after a few months.

In 1995, Jacqueline Milner wrote an essay for the *Critical Spaces* exhibition at Artspace, about how ARIs in Sydney at that time were suffering.⁵ Shortly after, most of the ARIs involved in that project, including Pendulum and Selenium, disappeared when Sydney real estate prices began to skyrocket. Old factory buildings in the inner city were demolished and redeveloped into apartment blocks. In 1996, the Australia Council brought some relief by providing some to ARIs through the Australian Government's 'Young and Emerging Artists Initiative', which granted \$500,000 to ARIs between 1996 and 2002. In government budgets that's chicken feed; however, this signalled important official recognition by a major funding body of the importance and value of ARIs.

The most significant shift for ARIs came in 2002, when the Australian Government published the *Report of the Contemporary Visual Arts and Craft Inquiry* (the 'Myer Report'). It didn't make any mainstream headlines, but it did have an important impact on ARIs. The Report recognised that ARIs occupy an important place, but received very little support from governments. As a consequence of the Report, the Federal and State Governments allocate hundreds of thousands of dollars specifically for ARIs. Indeed, times have been good for ARIs in recent years. Just last year, Dominique Angeloro wrote that ARIs such as Chalk Horse had established a fairly powerful position in the Australian art world because of the buoyancy in the art market at that time.⁶

But how markets change.

As the Global Financial Crisis bites, it is vital now that ARIs continue to be supported by governments with funding and by us, the public, with our feet. To borrow Bruce Barber's terminology again, Match Box Projects and many artist-run initiatives are "lifeworld affirming as opposed to system reproducing",⁷ and a time when we're told to brace for the worst is exactly the time when we most need the energy of people like Leanne and Naomi and ideas as affirmative as Match Box Projects.

¹ Barber, Bruce, *Sentences on Littoral Art*, 1998

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ Myer et al, *Report of the Contemporary Visual Arts and Craft Inquiry*, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Australian Government, Canberra, 2002, p. 204

⁵ Milner, Jaqueline, 'Something, but not critical: The less than intimate relationship between critical writing and artist-run initiatives', *Critical Spaces*, Artspace, Sydney, 1995

⁶ Angeloro, Dominique, 'Run ARI Run', *Artist Profile*, Issue 4, 2008, 2008, pp. 72-73

⁷ Barber, *ibid*