

THE POLITICS OF CULTURE VERSUS THE POLITICS OF CULTURE

Kit Messham-Muir

Exhibitions of the work of emerging artists have always been more than a little problematic for their curators and those writing the catalogue essays. For example, in their catalogue essay for the 1994 *Fresh Art* exhibition, the curators, Anne Loxley and Felicity Fenner, made sure to point out that their choice of artists is not a "bookmakers recommendation of 'artists to watch', but ... a survey of artists who are worth watching now".¹ They seemed eager to make clear that the work of the emerging artists of that time were important to the vitality of art's discourse, while at the same time they seemed to remain cautiously mindful that today's emerging artists are not necessarily tomorrow's established artists.

A year after Loxley and Fenner's *Fresh Art*, I was involved in an Artspace project on artist-run galleries titled *Critical Spaces*. For that project, I wrote a catalogue essay in association with Pendulum gallery, which was run by the enthusiastic and capable hands of Mishka Borowski. In that essay, I argued that artist-run initiatives were not simply 'alternative' spaces or a talent-pool for commercial galleries, but were an important and vital element of contemporary art activity. It is still the case today that artist-run initiatives are vital to the practices of most emerging artists. However, many artist-run initiatives, and the artists who exhibit within them, seem to have a limited life span. Since *Critical Spaces*, Pendulum has folded, along with a number of artist-run initiatives, and the profiles of many of the artists involved in both the *Fresh Art* exhibition and the *Critical Spaces* project have diminished.

Practically, looking at these projects five years on, it becomes apparent that while projects like these supported new artists, the next stepping-stone has been missing. These projects now seem to offer themselves as cautionary tales about the fickleness of the Sydney art world, or perhaps they say something about how fresh emerging artists become casualties in a war of attrition, or maybe they demonstrate the pervasiveness of the cult of youth within our culture in general. Certainly, the value of youth in our culture is a significant part of the problem for present emerging artists, but not in any simple way. I will return to this later. Firstly, it is worthwhile here looking at the federal government initiatives which have funded this present Artspace project, in relation to certain philosophical problems which arise, as well as the ethos which determines the present government's cultural politics its broader policies.

In the August 1996 federal budget, John Howard's government released a number of

'Special Commonwealth Government Initiatives' for the arts totalling \$14 million over three years. For 1998-99 the Government allocated \$1.5 million "to provide emerging artists with greater opportunities for career development as well as public exposure for their work".² Of course, the term 'emerging artists' tends to operate as a synonym of 'young artists'. With the exception of the MCA's *Primavera*, which is an exhibition dedicated to 'young' artists in memory of the death of the young Belinda Jackson, most institutions shy from the term 'young artists', and rightly so. However, the term 'emerging artists' is now at a point at which a synonym becomes a metonym, where the language of affirmative action succumbs to the stubborn actualities of practices. For the federal government, \$1.5 million is a fair price for the gloss of youth, the sexiness of the implied avant-gardism which comes from funding young artists, and paying-off any accusation of philistinism.

It may seem somewhat ungrateful to inspect the mouth of this gift-horse, but what are the practical and philosophical implications of this special initiative? Policy in the field of contemporary arts is potentially problematic in its theoretical dimension. To talk briefly in more abstract terms, policy attempts to add structure where there is fluidity, it both makes and creates assumptions. As Brian Massumi argues:

structure is the place where nothing ever happens, that explanatory heaven in which all eventual permutations are prefigured in a self-consistent set of invariant generative rules.³

Generally speaking, within our culture, structure manifests as the fixing of subjectivities, their capacities and the discourse that is possible between them.

When a fluid tactical field of relations, such as art discourse, is figured in terms of the structure of strategy, then, if we are to believe Paul Virilio, *logistics* follows.⁴ Practically, for art discourse, this means that strategic policy and structure potentially restrains vitality, and in turn art production becomes a matter of prefiguring practice in relation to what is financially possible or viable in terms of what is likely to be funded. Thus, an otherwise fluid discourse gravitates towards structure and an imperative for artists to define themselves in terms of identity politics, fixed subjectivities, and received centres and peripheries. Potentially, government policies ossify the fluency of art discourse, they turn flesh into bone, fluidity into rule, and multiple tactical tensions into a consonant strategy. Yet, the vitality of art discourse feeds on conflicts, uneven tensions and the fluidity of voices which are not anchored to essential subject positions.

Further to this, the deployment of strategy in art discourse tends to rigidly characterise that discourse. Not only are there ideologically ascribed assumptions which attend any policy, but by deploying 'strategy' in itself, it is assumed that art discourse is singular and isolable. Michel de Certeau talks about this function of strategy where he says:

I call 'strategy' the calculus of force-relations which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment'. A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *propre* (*proprie*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, 'clienteles', 'targets', or 'objects' of research) on this strategic model.⁵

The strategy of arts policy assumes to circumscribe a domain of art that is distinct from wider culture. Within the axioms of such strategy, a particular quasi-Greenbergian avant-gardist notion of 'art', as a culturally autonomous realm, is reinforced. Of course, art is a distinct cultural discourse of its own, but the problem with a centralised definition

which is assumed, and reinforced, under strategy, is that art's boundaries and its wider cultural exchanges are less readily up for debate. As a cultural domain, the dissonance surrounding what the boundaries of domain in itself, what it should address and what its functions should or could be, sustains a degree of vitality which would suffocate if there was anything approaching consensus. By attempting to structure art discourse in a very practical way, by striving to prefigure permutations, neutralise tensions, policy attempts to direct discourse, which then is no longer 'discourse', but confluence.⁶

While the Hansonite/One Nation argument against affirmative action politics suggests that it provides unequal over-funding to marginal groups, it is possibly more the case that this kind of funding policy further marginalises them and normalises the 'centre', and thus fails in its purpose to redress inequalities within the wider social and cultural context. By allocating funds specific to a defined group like 'emerging artists', defined by the arbitrary criterion of less than five years professional experience, the government initiative implies, by default, that more general funding excludes emerging artists. In addition to this, it puts artists in a position in which, should they wish to be funded and to thus 'have a voice', their 'voice' must be contextualised in prescriptive and overdetermining terms. The category of 'emerging artists' tends to figure art production in terms of career, rather than practice. Therefore, artists are more inclined to frame themselves in terms of such bureaucratically ascribed categories, and primarily in terms of a restrictive identity position.

The danger in questioning government policies on arts funding is that it may be taken as an argument that anything other than laissez-faire government is bureaucratic interference in natural market forces. However, though the structure of government funding policies is artistically problematic, government funding is vital for Australian contemporary art. Even if we thought that market forces were unproblematically organic and fluid, they cannot operate in the Australian art world because of the simple fact that the forces which come to bear in the culture of the contemporary Australian art world are far more abstract than simple economics. They are the manifold forces of ambitious drives, intellectual conceit, political positionings and allegiances, and sometimes even engaging with critical discourse, but, unless an artist is stabled by one of a handful of commercial galleries, 'market forces' are more libidinal than financial.

In practical terms, Australian art needs government funding, but not through federal government initiatives which attempt to strategically define what Australian art is and what it is not, which either ignores internal conflict and multiplicity, or attempts to overdetermine multiplicities as definitive positions. However, how can a body such as the Australia Council, whose entire purpose is to develop policy, allow a more fluid and tactical art discourse without policy? To some extent, the practices of many artists bypass this question anyhow, because for many emerging artists the government money that goes to the Visual Arts and Crafts Fund of Australia Council, and its policies for distributing those funds, affects them much less than certain other government services. Amongst most artists with whom I associate, as important as the Australia Council is in providing funding to artists through direct grants or through contemporary art spaces such as Artspace, the greatest economic support for many emerging artists comes from areas of government not directly considered to be funding bodies to the arts, particularly the tertiary education system and the dole.

Although it could never be argued that tertiary education is not policy directed, the tertiary

education system provides a very direct support to emerging artists through the nation's art colleges and, importantly, without imposing an overdetermining structure on the kinds of practices which are supported. If there cannot be a government funding body which operates without the structure of policy, then the closest we have to one are our art colleges. For many artists, art college not only provides tuition and like-minded contemporaries, but more importantly it provides the very practical support of a studio space and access to equipment. This is the main reason cited by many of my former fellow class mates from Sydney College of the Arts who, eight years after enrolling in first year undergrad, are still pursuing postgraduate study. To leave after three years means no studio, no equipment and, for many, no contact with contemporaries.

In the USA in the late 1980s, when the Republicans in the American Senate wished to control art discourse, they realised that the specific policies of the National Endowment of the Arts, the government's arts funding body, could not be manipulated from a legislative level, except by attacking its funding in general. While universities have enjoyed a relative amount of political autonomy, the general funding cuts to tertiary education, which have amounted to over \$800 million since the Liberal Government was elected in 1996, have effectively stifled this autonomy. Consequently, the ethos of academic freedom in universities has given way to a corporate ethos, and universities tend to first cut funding to those faculties which are less likely to bring in business, namely the arts faculties.

In the days of the Keating Prime Ministership there were rumours circulating amongst art students that the government was considering providing the dole to art school graduates for their first few years out in the world, without the usual requirement to be actively seeking employment. Whether this was merely fantasy, caught up in the enthusiasm of the artist's dream world promised by Keating's Creative Nation, is unclear. However, it did highlight the fact that the dole supports many artists in the first years after graduation. Given the present anti-welfare sentiment which has dominated in our culture in the '90s, fuelled by Hansonism, talk-back radio, and evening current affairs stories on evil dole bludgers (for example, the endless Paxton Family stories in 1996), it is now virtually unspeakable to discuss the dole as being an important resource for emerging artists. However, if we could identify the primary support of emerging artists, it would likely be the dole.

A number of my contemporaries have been on the dole since leaving art college. Others manage to get by working part-time, and making art on the weekend, but many of them have simply given up art and got 'proper' jobs. Given the general suspicion with which our present culture treats people on the dole, it is now inconceivable that artists should get any easier access to it. Most of those who still get the dole have been placed in reskilling programs, which ignores the fact that they already have skills, and a degree.

As I have argued, the Federal government initiatives more thoroughly establishes the distinct funding category of emerging artists, which to some extent trades on the cult of youth within Western culture. Throughout our culture, a 'surplus' cultural value is extracted from youth, which makes it a value in itself. In *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord calls this 'youth-capital'. Of course, throughout Western culture, the value of 'youth-capital' comes at the expense of that which is no longer new and young. As Debord says, "it is strictly forbidden to grow old".⁷ Indeed, this is a well-known argument. Nevertheless, as Debord indicates, we should not overestimate the value of youth, because even its is a

lesser force than finance in general, and is subordinated to it:

Even 'youth-capital', contrived for each and all and put to the most mediocre uses, could never acquire the durable and cumulative reality of financial capital.⁸

To extrapolate from Debord, while our culture's value of youth may nurture emerging artists, and somewhat neglect those who are no longer new, the value of youth in itself is contingent upon its financial exchange value. This is certainly borne out in the present situation.

While the present government special initiative gives \$1.5 million to promote emerging artists, the value of youth does not extend much further than a visible but cynical and token attempt to compensate for the effects of a more general neglect of Australian cultural life. Sure enough, many once-emerging artists may simply lose interest and change careers out of choice. However, if emerging artists want to become established artists, their opportunities are growing ever slimmer. The Liberal government's special initiative on emerging artists attempts glibly to purchase a little sexy 'youth-capital' at the price of \$1.5 million, while their \$800 million cut to tertiary education effectively undermines a major support to emerging artists and their capacity to generate and engage in a fluid and undetermined discursive exchange.

Notes and references

1. Fenner, F. and Loxley, A. 'Fresh Everyday', *Fresh Art*, S.H. Ervin Gallery, 1994, p. 2.
2. Australia Council, 'Special Commonwealth Government Initiatives', URL: <http://www.ozco.gov.au/whatwedo/initiati.htm>, accessed 29.4.99.
3. Massumi, B. 'The Autonomy of Affect', *Deleuze: a critical reader*, ed. Paul Patton, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 220-221.
4. Virilio, P. *Pure war*, trans. Mark. Polizotti, New York: Semiotext(e), 1983, pp. 14-15.
5. De Certeau, M. *The practice of everyday life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles (USA) and London (UK), 1984, p. xix.
6. For more on my criticism of critical discourse in Australia in the 1990s, see 'Critical Dys-course', *Critical Spaces*, Artspace, Sydney, pp. 17 -20.
7. Debord, G. *Society of the spectacle*, Detroit: Black & Red, 1963, para. 160.
8. Ibid.