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## **Artist-run Melbourne**

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Melbourne is a lucky little state capital, saturated with an abundance of artist-run galleries and even more commercial spaces, located every few hundred metres within our fine metropolis. (This first sentence reads somewhat like an excerpt from a piece of promotional propaganda, plugging Melbourne's cultural assets for a buck, but that's not what this piece of writing is about.)

These little artist-run galleries (or artist-run spaces, artist-run initiatives, ARIs—whatever you want to call them) provide a nice creamy, rich and often exciting layer to the arts and cultural scene that can't be delivered by the state institutions and the commercial arts pushers. You chasing? Melbourne is always chasing.

Almost all innovation occurs on the fringes, the edges. It is the tiny movements that occur at this grassroots level where there is more room to move, more room to splash about, more room for action than there is in a conventional space that has to suit up, employ security guards and take out all the applicable public liability insurance. Ripple. There's more room for ripples at an artist-run gallery.

This DIY, artist-run scene is a bicycle wheel, an ouroboros, but not completely. There is change as well, with every turn, so a comparison to evolution or an operatic recapitulation would be better. The metaphors aren't what're important. What's important is the reality of it: all the work, the effort, the money that goes into sustaining the phenomena of an artist-run gallery. It's high maintenance, all hands on deck, grab a cup and start

trying to bail out the water that's slowly filling this place — there's no fear of drowning but we'd have to find somewhere new to hang out.

There is no logical reason why these spaces should survive. For the most part, they're non-profit and run by volunteers, their rent is predominantly paid by exhibiting artists with patchwork-agendas, and exhibition programs can chop, change and alternate, which, for an unwary spectator, can appear pretty impenetrable and recalcitrant (please feel free to liken to: [a] being in a foreign country; [b] trying to have a conversation with a surly teen; or [c] the confusing and often contradictory bureaucracy described in *The Trial* by Kafka).

Thankfully though, artist-run galleries have flourished in Melbourne. They're a relatively new strange breed of society's cultural genus in comparison to the grand expanse of all the history that has come before them. Some of the stronger artist-run hubs live longer than a few years, usually by gaining attention for being novel or inventive start-ups, or sometimes notoriety for being raucous or shocking. Artist-run galleries are in a unique position to operate differently due to the lack of formal and financial constraints that bind institutions and commercial spaces, allowing for unconventional innovation or abundant raucous, punk energy.

Some of these spaces are so successful they go on to evolve into contemporary commercial spaces, keeping their original open-minded governing principles that had served them well in round one of their life-cycles (Geoff Newton started the avant-suburban Dudespace and then later went on to found Neon Parc with Tristian Koenig, and Melissa Loughnan's Utopian Slumps was a once humble curator-run initiative stuffed down a laneway in Collingwood).

SEVENTH is one of the long stayers. Viewer attendance and artists' favour are the key to an artist-run space surviving and growing, and this comes off the back of good programming — the careful selection of a range of diverse artists, who are also inevitably pushing a field of disparate concepts and ideas. This is what excites the interest of the artists and viewers. This is where SEVENTH excels. Ad-hoc programming — that is,

employing difference—can become a strength, meaning the leftovers are always fffresh.

ARIs are often collectively managed and led by many. This characteristic avoids the destructive and selfish egomania that can occur with the individual, most noticeable in the reign of dictators. And as a bonus, the collective can be cast out but never destroyed, just ask Legion. When groupings of creative peeps disband, they often do as the hydra does, and start their own projects (when Tristian Koenig left Neon Parc in 2010, he went on to open a new self-titled space in Prahran). So where there was one, there are now two.

Presumably, you know all this; you are all dirigible captains and I'm lecturing about aerodynamics. Artist-run spaces aren't held together by any single agenda, force or adhesive, they're supported by a multitude of small pebbles such as government funding (which allows for writing that includes the words 'fffresh', 'ouroboros' and 'patchwork-agendas'), small armies of loyal artists and students and, of course, a (usually) over-qualified management team of (usually) volunteers.

There's no chance here, no accident. This is purposeful, conscious; this is the ongoing apexing of cultural-evolution; only the strongest wheat survives the chaff. It's impossible to capture such a fluxual creature as the ARI, we can only observe it for a moment before it changes, record its movements, document its shifting state, because every change that occurs is important, every alteration in the past helps inform the now. This is the now.