

# RISKY BUSINESS: A CONVERSATION AROUND ARTIST-RUNS AND PROFESSIONALISATION

with Chloe Geoghegan and Emma Bugden

CG Emma, you have recently completed your PhD examining three artist-run spaces: *RM*, *Enjoy* and *MEANWHILE*. In my experience running an artist-run initiative (ARI) involves taking on a certain amount of risk, and in fact, all different kinds of risk. You've also experienced running an ARI early on in your career (*The Honeymoon Suite*), so I am firstly wondering what your thoughts on the notion of "risk" are when it comes to running small spaces and working together to make exhibitions within the ARI sphere?

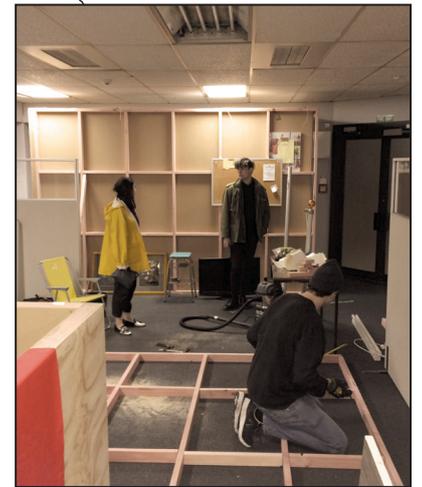
EB I like that you begin with risk, because that is where my own research started. I realised I was wedded to the founding narratives of artist-run history, which frame experimentation, risk and "otherness" as fundamental tenets of practice. They range from stories of New York artist-runs in the 1970s to the setting up of Teststrip in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in the early 1990s. Your own subjectivity rears up to confront you. I was taken aback at the lack of attachment that current artist-run space participants seemed to have to risk.

For instance, participants involved with *Enjoy* (a formalised organisation with a board and paid staff) raised frustrations over changes to Health and Safety legislation. There was talk of ladders and cables—in other words, mitigating and managing physical risk in a climate of heightened anxiety.

*MEANWHILE* were in the middle of developing their Kaupapa and Safer Spaces policy. Safety is a concept with new meaning in a #metoo era. *MEANWHILE* members argued that experimentation was best facilitated in an environment that supports and nurtures otherness (as their Safer Spaces policy puts it, "we encourage innovative practice, but not at the cost of alienating or harming others"). In this sense, safety is less a physical state of culpability, but is instead about culture and identity.

Letting go of my attachment to risk meant I could listen to other concerns—like questions of how artists can operate within a neoliberal moment, which according to Canadian artist-run activist Clive Robertson asks them to regulate themselves as "good administrators, artists, workers."<sup>1</sup> They have to define themselves in a very different way, strategically working within rather than fighting from outside, because neoliberal discourse has a way of swallowing and incorporating anything outside. Old, binary notions of inside and outside are less relevant.

Instead of "risk," I prefer art historian Gene Ray's term "relative autonomy," which talks about the ways in which artists might limit or manage their collusion with neoliberal rhetorics of rationalisation and market responsiveness.<sup>2</sup> That acknowledges the complexities facing artist-run spaces in an art world embedded with neoliberal orthodoxies. At the same time artists still encounter Romantic and Modernist attitudes, which position them as special—agents of otherness.



Building walls at *MEANWHILE*, Victoria Street, Pōneke Wellington, November 2016. Image courtesy of *MEANWHILE*.

1. Clive Robertson, "Movement and Apparatus: A Cultural Policy Study of Artist-Run Culture in Canada (1976–1994)" (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2004), 8.

2. Gene Ray, "Culture Industry and the Administration of Terror: In Critique of Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the 'Creative Industries,'" in *Creative Industries*, ed. Gerald Raunig, Gene Ray and Ulf Wuggenig (London: MayFly Books, 2011), 167–81.

From your work in an artist-run space in Ōtautahi Christchurch immediately after the earthquakes, when an inspiring—but maybe limiting—narrative of urban regeneration and transformation emerged, does “relative autonomy” speak to your experience?

CG Dog Park Art Project Space, the ARI that Ella Sutherland and I ran in Ōtautahi Christchurch between 2012 and 2014, was certainly (to use your terminology) a special agent of otherness. Special, because had we opened it up in “normal-Christchurch,” it would have been just another ARI in the network of galleries around town. However, with no city and with the Gap Filler paradigm engulfing all post-quake creative dialogues, we were seen as doing something different simply by trying to be a normal gallery space that didn’t engage directly in the earthquake narrative.

Christchurch at this time prided itself on change, and while other projects were capitalising on this, we were trying to rebuild (a better) status quo in the community by creating an industrial white cube gallery space that presented local, national and international exhibitions. We purposefully didn’t engage with the urban regeneration narratives, which perhaps means we had Ray’s “relative autonomy” going. It’s funny though because of course we were a post-quake creative project, but we were seen as going against the grain because we wanted to be critical, and not use old wooden palettes, AstroTurf and oversized street furniture.

Taking this stance, however, didn’t feel like a risk to me. The risk of opening the space felt natural, but it was the financial risk that was the most difficult experience. In order to get our space in a newly risk-adverse property market, we created a company, signed a commercial lease and dealt with a body corporate. I dropped out of my studies and worked because I was terrified of not being able to pay the rent and expenses through competitive funding, which didn’t feel as available to us as it does now, especially in the quantity that we needed to reduce this risk factor and make more space to develop the project. I suppose different ARI groups experience different kinds of risk, from safety to money, but the whole idea is that starting an ARI is all about taking on some kind of risk and hoping it’ll pay off for you and your community. Do you think that risk is linked to professionalisation? I owe a lot to the ARI model for helping me become employable.

EB Yes, I agree risk and professionalism are closely linked—the anxiety of financial risk often fueling the drive to professionalise. Financial precarity is a hallmark of the artist-run space scene.

Funding offers an opportunity to pay the rent, modest artist fees, perhaps even pay the workers that make the space happen. But funding often brings an expectation to professionalise and adopt more conventional management structures. More radical forms of organising, such as a collective with consensus decision-making, often sit outside what funders understand. This is not to speak against professionalisation: there are plenty of examples where professionalisation engenders vibrancy. And it is certainly not to speak against funding—which can support scale and longevity and enable extraordinary projects to occur. But funding is not neutral.



Chloe Geoghegan attempting to use a piece of oversized street furniture in the Ōtautahi Christchurch Post-Quake CBD, 2014. Image courtesy of Chloe Geoghegan.



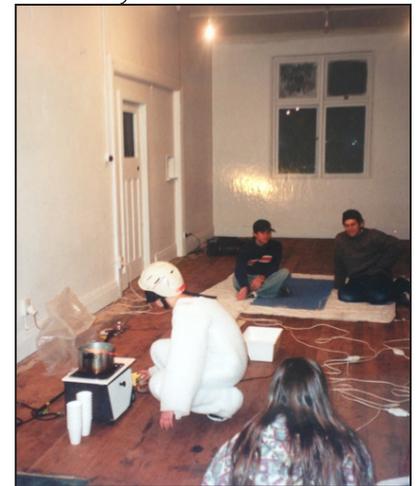
Opening of Ella Sutherland and Dave Marshall, *THIS THAT*, Dog Park Art Project Space, Ōtautahi Christchurch, 2012. Image courtesy of Stacey Weaver.

Most artist-run spaces end after one or two years simply because their founders find the juggle of paid work, their own art practice and the work of running the space too hard. Bundled up in this complex matrix are the blurred lines between work and passion, labour and creativity. Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton described the tension between paid work and one's artistic practice as the "double life." I think artist-run space participants are living a "triple life."<sup>3</sup>

3. Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton, *Creative Careers and Non-Traditional Trajectories* (London: National Arts Learning Network, 2008).

CG Yes indeed. I feel as though that's why I couldn't continue "ARI life" once our lease expired, and was eager to take a similar but paid job that came with the support of a charitable trust and trustees that have a share in the success of a project space. Arriving at *Blue Oyster* after running Dog Park was exhilarating because of this, as well as the access to established volunteer groups, existing investment funding, professional development opportunities and an audience that understood what the gallery was about. However, Ella and I have some incredible memories of running Dog Park together that I couldn't live without—so the ARI experience is still a very important anchor point for me. I suppose you could say that *The Honeymoon Suite* could be the same for you, as a space that is still talked about today two decades later.

Artist-runs, some forty years or more from their first inception in Aotearoa if you begin with the Artists' Co-op in 1977, have proven their immense value to the art economy and those that operate within it. This is a little utopian, but perhaps larger, longer term grants should be considered for these groups. This would mean risk does not have to take over the mindset of those embarking on creating a community and a piece of art history with an exhibition programme. But then, I suppose that lowers the risk element and would lead to less pressure on these groups to be making really great ARI shows from nothing. Perhaps risk is everything.



Emma Bugden, *Filter Action*, performance, *The Honeymoon Suite*, Ōtepoti Dunedin, 1997. Originally performed by Andrew Drummond, 1981. Image courtesy of Emma Bugden.

EB Do I think the reduction of financial risk leads to reduced capacity for artistic risk? Short answer—yes. The long answer is, of course, that we're talking about complex correlations.

But if we pull back, to think about why an artist-run space might qualify for funding, it's generally not for the purposes of community building—that is a happy by-product. A funding agency like Creative New Zealand is, by and large, funding spaces as infrastructure through which individual artists (and increasingly curators) emerge into mainstream exhibition and market formats. To be crass, they're trying to back winners.

Success through that lens looks like a linear trajectory—I show my artwork at an ARI, a public gallery curator sees it and selects me for a group exhibition, a dealer asks to represent me, I am on my way. It's clear that both you and I have personally benefited from the ladder that ARIs offer emerging curators, finding our way into the public gallery system through our initial involvement establishing spaces. I'm forever grateful for that.

But could we prioritise additional funding mechanisms for artist-run spaces that recognise a broader community-building role? Perhaps the closest we have so far is the modest funding that Wellington City Council has allocated

MEANWHILE and play\_station through the Creative Communities scheme.

Ultimately, I think we need a diversity of spaces: spaces propelled by artistic and personal risk, that burn out in a blaze of glory leaving behind nothing but anecdotes; spaces that evolve into well-behaved, funded organisations that stay the distance, acting as launching pads focused on career development; and spaces that stick around but take a slower, quieter role as a testing ground, less financially secure and more explorative. The kind of messy, textured art world I want to inhabit would value all of these models equally, for different reasons.

CG Yes, I agree, we do need to maintain that sense of variety. I can't help relating the development of the ARI to Darwin's theory of evolution and the importance of variety. Without the openness the arts community has towards different ARI models, we simply wouldn't be producing such an incredible and invaluable range of practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand. But in saying that, Darwinism is about natural selection, which the art world has multitudes of. Competing, surviving and (re)producing your work within the art paradigm is a struggle and can end in failure, disappointment and disillusionment.

You mentioned two different kinds of spaces—those that burn bright but only leave memories, and those that slowly chug away turning the earth. These two kinds of ARIs sit at opposite ends of the art historical continuum that continues to stretch further and further out as new groups innovate and push the idea of ARIs. When I was researching small spaces for my Honours dissertation in 2011 alongside starting up Dog Park, I loved looking into The Physics Room's Log Illustrated archive online, as well as High Street Project's papers housed at the University of Canterbury's Macmillan Brown Library. Without these archives we would have no perspective on risk or professionalisation, no hindsight for future generations and less of an ability to reflect on what ARI risk actually looks like. These archives helped me understand what I was getting myself into with Dog Park.

With RM having made their archive accessible to the public in recent years, and Blue Oyster having just donated twenty years of archives to the Hocken Library, it makes me wonder what future generations of ARI makers will be able to do with the concept given this greater access to primary resources, as well as the significant role that social media and the internet in general have played as the ultimate public archive to learn from.

EB What should I do and how should I do it? This interview has been completed in fits and starts, in the gaps between childcare (both of us), moving cities and jobs (you), juggling contracts and publishing a book (me). It is a conversation conducted at a distance, at 6am and 10pm, when other responsibilities are at rest. It's hard to carve out space to reflect.

Artist-run culture moves at a similar relentless pace, endlessly generating new versions of old models and, in doing so, often neglecting to look back. But isn't that exciting? I love that a model invented out of the necessity of gaps continues to find relevance, shapeshifting in response to new tensions and fissures, new gaps in the cultural terrain. What should I do and how should I do it? Find a space; make a sign; a Facebook page; buy some beers and send out an invitation. Insert yourself into the conversation: expand and complicate the narrative.



Rachel Smithies pours drinks at Enjoy's inaugural opening, Enjoy, Pōneke Wellington, 2000. Image courtesy of Rachel Smithies.



Howard Matil exhibition opening, Rm212, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2000. Image courtesy of Joyoti Wylie.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Emma Bugden has recently submitted a PhD in Museum and Heritage Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, titled “Testing Grounds and Launching Pads: Situating the Artist-Run Space Today.” She is co-founder and editor of Small Bore Books, a specialist art publishing imprint that connects historic texts with new audiences. She has held curatorial roles including senior curator at The Dowse Art Museum, director at ARTSPACE, curatorial director at Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts and curator at City Gallery Wellington. She has recently taken up the position of Strategic Lead: Creative Industries and Arts, for Whanganui & Partners, the economic development agency for Whanganui District Council.

Chloe Geoghegan holds a BFA(Hons) in Graphic Design and Art History, and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Art Curatorship from the University of Canterbury. She is currently curator at Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Art Gallery, has held positions in Dunedin at Hocken Collections (2019) and Blue Oyster Art Project Space (2014–17) and co-founded Dog Park Art Project Space in Christchurch (2012–14). She has travelled to China and Korea on the CNZ Asia NZ Curators Tour and to New York for an ICI Curatorial Intensive. She has written for several platforms including: *HUM*, *Pantograph Punch*, *Hue & Cry*, *un Magazine*, *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *On Curating* and *HAMSTER*. She is interested in furthering curatorial discourse around art in Aotearoa through critical writing, exhibiting and publishing.

