

Letters

Dear Editors,

For someone who claims to know the story, Daniel Jewesbury's account of Arthouse in Variant Winter 2002 is fairly out of touch.

Jewesbury talks about the closing of Arthouse by dwelling on its opening. The majority of his article produces opinions formed circa 1995, which at that time may have been relevant and informed, but reproduced today, are misleading. In 1995 there were real concerns. Few knew what the Internet was, and what role computers would have in art practice. He wilfully omits that over the next eight years artists began to figure that out, some quite effectively. Arthouse closed, that much is true. Jewesbury wants us to think a main problem was a lack of dedicated exhibition space. 'Where was its centre?', he implores. According to him, 'the cafe became the only effective and frequented space in the building,' and Arthouse was 'ill-used' and 'ill-defined'. In fact, artists used Arthouse. They were the backbone of its activity, the majority of its public, and were members of its staff and Board. Arthouse always had dedicated exhibition space, three at the time it closed. Its programmes originated from many points of interaction, including exhibitions, residencies, production, and arts information, as well as from unofficial, informal and unmediated exchanges.

It's important to recognise that Jewesbury's position is fundamentally conservative. Echoing people who dismiss artists' practice while only having the vaguest understanding of what it involves, Jewesbury dismisses the activity at Arthouse and invents a place that was 'ill-used', with no effect. Whether he liked what was taking place there or not, one fact remains. An organisation in Dublin centred on artists at every stage of their artistic production, closed. As public space, Arthouse was artist driven. In missing this crucial point, Jewesbury plays right into the hands of those who need justification to continue curbing, censoring, and closing down our public space.

Sincerely, Sarah Pierce

Artist and former Artistic Director of Arthouse

Variant Responds

Sarah Pierce's letter is unfortunate in that it dramatically misconstrues the editorial piece published in our last issue. That piece counterposed two stories, the closure of Arthouse and the spectacular failure of Belfast's bid to be European Capital of Culture 2008, in order to establish a basic argument, that artists continue to suffer from maladroit administration of 'the arts'. The very infrastructure which is meant to support artistic production, and to enable wide audience participation in that activity, is very often poorly devised and poorly administered; our piece made the point that this is usually because artists, the people who might be expected to know most about these issues, are so seldom consulted on or included in decisions which directly affect them and the conditions of their work.

We stand by this argument. We do not accept Pierce's assertion that latterly, artists had somehow appropriated Arthouse, wresting its control away from the Cultural Industrialists who 'managed' the institution. Our article did not attempt to describe in intricate detail the death throes of Arthouse: we did not consider it particularly relevant to analyse whether the Irish government, the Arts Council of Ireland, Temple Bar Properties or indeed all three were to blame for its demise. It's enough to be aware that someone clearly blundered, and that it's unlikely to have been the city's artists.

Projects initiated or run by artists usually consist of something other than the building in which they are housed (indeed they often have only an arbitrary connection with it). As a result they do not suddenly cease to exist when someone else takes the money away. This is the most important product of artists provisioning themselves with an

infrastructure: autonomy. If Arthouse had genuinely transmogrified into an artist-run organisation, to where did its activities relocate after the evacuation of Curved Street?

It is ironic, to say the least, that Pierce should choose to carry the torch for the administration which put her out of a job. At the end of the summer of 2000, after the brief bedhop that was Tim Brennan's sojourn as artistic director, Arthouse was generally agreed to be at its lowest point. This was several years after its inception. Pierce's contention that Arthouse very quickly shed the ontological crises which beset its early days is therefore simply not true. We are quite happy to state, however, that with Pierce's appointment came a new clarity of purpose and a sustained level of activity. These were things that hitherto had simply not existed. We find it unfortunate, and unbecoming, that the person left to defend the institution is not one of those who made the decision to curtail this renewed activity, but she whose own ideas were aborted as a result.

A couple of Pierce's points demand specific responses. Refuting an argument made in our editorial, she insists that Arthouse had three 'dedicated exhibition spaces' at the time of its closure. This is not true. The word "dedicated" is clearly used by us to denote a space specifically designed for exhibitions. Arthouse never had one, let alone three of these. Pierce may have turned different parts of the building over to exhibitions (the basement had irregularly been used as an installation space before her arrival), but she could not somehow retrospectively include something omitted from the building in the first place. Ever since the 'new' technologies were first touted as tools for artistic production, there have been artists aware that the use of digital media would inevitably collide with the use of other media, and that new installational forms—requiring flexible and versatile spaces—would develop. Arthouse only accommodated these new forms partially, inadequately; this is inevitable given that it was prematurely conceptualised itself. Only now, a decade after vague plans for Arthouse were first mooted, and after both it and The Lux have ceased to exist, has FACT been able to open what promises to be a genuinely well-used and influential centre for the digital arts. (New media dedicated facilities in Scotland are noticeably absent from this discussion.)

Pierce maintains that artists formed "the majority of [Arthouse's] public." This admission is not necessarily something she should be too proud of. What happened to the idea that artists might communicate something to a wider community?

Furthermore, her emphasis of Arthouse's "unofficial, informal and unmediated exchanges" deserves investigation too; how transparent and open were these "exchanges", and to what extent were they initiated by and for people already very familiar with the building's facilities?

Pierce indulges in some rather cheap invective at the end of her letter. Specifically, she accuses me of being "fundamentally conservative" and of having only "the vaguest understanding" of that practice which Arthouse was intended to illuminate. The latter point hardly merits a response, except to say that as a practising artist, critic, lecturer and theorist I have investigated the use and conditions of digital technologies in the broadest of contexts, and for several years. I maintain that Arthouse was not a facility that provided the "public space" Pierce describes. Indeed, I believe it's both naïve and self-limiting to suggest that my criticisms of Arthouse and of the manner of its closure somehow "play into the hands" of those who seek to curtail art's field of influence. Rather the opposite. Were Pierce to run (or, perhaps, were she to co-operate, as an unpaid volunteer, in the running of) an organisation that really had the interests of artists at its heart, no doubt she would achieve far more than was possible at Arthouse; and no doubt, given the opportunity, she would be able to acknowledge this.

Some light can be thrown on these arguments if we turn to look at recent developments at Catalyst Arts in Belfast (another organisation with a ten-year history, but this time one actually conceived of and run by artists). Having been evicted and temporarily rehoused on Donegall Street by Laganside Corporation in late 2001, Catalyst were due to move into new premises at the start of this year. Protracted discussions amongst the Catalyst membership ensued: the proposed new building, Cotton Court, is a centrepiece of Laganside's 'Cathedral Quarter' development, a predictably cynical instrumentalisation of 'culture' in the name of private interests. Members were concerned that Catalyst should not be implicated in the engineering of yet another ghetto in Belfast (albeit a middle class one that calls itself a 'cultural quarter'), particularly at a time when artists have an opportunity to reach out and be involved in the city's material and conceptual reconstruction. More importantly, the refurbishment of Cotton Court, an old warehouse that is apparently one of the oldest buildings in the city, was carried out with little consultation with the prospective occupants. As Catalyst themselves have pointed out, large amounts of public money were squandered on inappropriate work, both in the Donegall



