

# FESARS

## The First European Seminar on Artist Run Spaces

The Stockholm based artist-run-space Konstakuten invited similar initiatives from across Europe (and beyond) to gather for *The First European Seminar on Artist Run Spaces* (FESARS). Over thirty initiatives participated, in addition various speakers were invited to further the discussion on the history, reality and future of artist-run-spaces. Per Hüttner, one of the organisers, explained that the initiatives present had come out of the informal artists' networks in place across Europe, the old snow ball principle. The main interest of this seminar therefore was to explore a shared and/ or synchronised future of artist-run-spaces across the continent, but at no point was this seminar meant to be representative of the entire European scene.

### From the organisational point of view: structure, culture and charisma in bureaucracy

The long and extensive weekend might well have been more generally concerned with artists' initiatives, instead a strong focus on 'the spaces within which activity happens' emerged. While not explicitly formulated or made part of the proceedings this issue certainly underlined most of the presentations made by the initiatives. It is precisely this concentration that structurally and content-wise made FESARS something very different, even so, sitting through over thirty presentations the seminar attendant did encounter moments of suppressed hyperactivity.

Everyone is an individual, for sure, nevertheless there did seem to be inherent stages and processes which most of the spaces present had gone through. Being more than just a collaborative project — in fact becoming a bureaucratic body seems to follow inherent rules which are shared across many forms of business, not only the arts. When combining efforts and taking on the task of establishing their own institutionalised form of presentation and representation, artists are clearly shifting from the stage of being one-person enterprises. In doing so they accept a level of bureaucratisation which is inherently counter-productive to the bare process of practice. It is important that this should not be mistaken with collaborative projects, which have proven to be advantageous to artists who are pooling resources and knowledge as a means to achieving goals —making work. Instead we are dealing with artists taking on the management and

restraints which come with the task of running an institution — an artist-run-space.

The artist-run-space in its minimal form will only be in existence for the one and only group of artists who set up the organisation. Their charismatic leadership and curatorial as well as artistic vision not only determine the place, but also the driving force behind it. At this level things 'just tend to happen'. In managing to establish the space within the local and sometimes international art scene, however, it tends to fall into a routine. The organisation will undergo the process of setting up more or less flexible structures within which the individuals running the joint can place themselves and a 'written constitution' most often follows simply because funding applications demand it. Once all this has been laid out, the doors can open for the generations of artists to follow the initial momentum of spontaneous self-determination.

As new members enter the institution they carry their expectations and hopes with them, nevertheless, the individual will very soon be in the process of defining their space so as to manoeuvre within the institution. To some extent this process is self-determined, to some extent it is brought towards the newcomer in terms of the structural realities laid out by the organisation. An example of this is the necessity of book keeping, which while it may be done in a looser way than the business world might expect, the bare necessities are the same, and seemingly acceptable to funding bodies.



In becoming part of a bureaucratic body, the individual in this environment additionally faces another quality of the bureaucratic structure: by default the individual needs to be replaceable. It is no good to have somebody keeping the books for two years, just to leave an inaccessible pile of paperwork for the next generation of ambitious artists that comes through — though this seems to be one of the main problems across artist-run-spaces that continue for more than one generational cycle, in other words spaces

which really do enter the logic of bureaucracy.

But it would be limiting to restrict the effects of artist-run-spaces to the structural problems of maintenance and continuity. One of the main excitements of artist-run-spaces lies on the side of curatorial practice, assuming that artists will do the art thing yet differently from the commercially biased gallery or the museology biased institution. At this point, the structural reality of the institution is secondary, and the cultural, or even charismatic quality comes into play. It is obvious that this is the point at which bureaucratic structures and demands, such as replaceability, are being turned upside down. In fact, I believe that the individual qualities of the artist entering an organisation, at some point will leave their individual and irreplaceable stamp. And they do.

### From a funding point of view: policy-making in the cultural industries

Running a space of any kind lifts the term artistic practice onto a different level. Many artists involved in artist-run-spaces express their resentment at the amount of logistic and managerial tasks which need to be taken care of, in some cases those structural forms of labour substitute their individual artistic practice altogether. Nevertheless, the initiatives present in Stockholm were all doing it. So it can't be all that bad...

Those collective efforts to become more than the sum of individuals are extremely important in the climate where the 'flexible workforce' has become the euphemism for potential unemployment at any given moment in one's average rocky biography. Concurrent to the attention of the 'cultural industries' as an economic sector, a broad range of arts activity has received an incredible amount of interest from the business world over the past years. In part this is due to an attraction to the very flexible structures in place within the arts that enable artists to operate as they do. Despite the reality that few artists really have steady and regular forms of employment the mortality rate is comparably low. Good enough a reason to put this system of self-maintenance under the economist's microscope —along with the funding bodies for the arts.

Tim Eastop and Eileen Daly from The Arts Council of England (ACE) put a strong emphasis on the development of appropriate policies in the field

of public arts funding. In their presentation "Strategies for Funding Artists in England" they pointed out that over the past few years an effort has been made by the Arts Councils and associated agencies to research the field of artistic practice throughout the UK and develop funding policies accord-



ingly. Moreover, a participative environment for policy development where artists are involved in the process of policy making was said to have been established. Such initiatives are even more interesting when put into the context of the restructuring of the funding body itself, namely The Arts Council of England. The most recent history of ACE seems to indicate that a restructuring of the process of policy development was not to be detached from the bureaucratic body itself. ACE has undergone a severe restructuring process, cutting management and departmental specification with various sections of responsibility being handed on to the Regional Arts Boards across England.

Further devolving to the regions the realising of funding policies within a framework set by central government seems an inevitable process in the present political climate. More interestingly, coupled to this regionalisation of fund distributing bodies we are also experiencing a shift to different parameters by which the 'quality' of artistic practice is being measured: social inclusion, audience development, cultural diversity, legacy and skill development to name but a few. Such funding policies being attempts to generate a check-list of acceptable artistic practice, a yardstick for qualifying art as 'good art'. This task seems ridiculous, but there seems little else funding bodies can do, or —come to that —have to do. Apart from the facade of regional autonomy, another restriction on such reallocation of money is the actual small amount of revenue available. The resulting situation is where funding policies and priorities come in handy, in the form of

gatekeeping.

In this situation it seems to be vital that artists have the right to participate in the process of policy making. Who else should know about where to put the money than those involved at the sharp end of grass-roots activity? But in the framework of FESARS the issue of funding policies is being taken much further. Whereas the participative models of policy-making for artists has gained a justified currency in funding bodies across Europe with a pronouncement of dedication to supporting individuals, artists, there is still no mechanism in place which would be remotely comparable when it comes to actual artist-run-spaces. At present funding for an artist-run-space might be reasonably consistent as long as the space manages to maintain itself through project oriented funding (gaining dedicated support from project to project). Support for the costs which come with simply running a space are being neglected by governmental agencies or incredibly hard to access. Capital funding might be a starting point, providing substantial coverage of buying/renting/renovating a space and supplying initial material and equipment, but receiving funding to keep going in providing such a resource is increasingly difficult.

This might be one of the most promising futures of the FESARS initiative, developing a lobbying group across Europe which will be in the position to establish a policy-making environment for artist-run-spaces. Outside of unshared government structure and policy, the main obstacle of such a lobbying group would of course be the fact that the individuals in such spaces tend to change comparatively quickly. This was expressed at the seminar when the issue of a possible second event arose. Not only was it unsure what artist-run-spaces could be present, but additionally it became obvious that some of the spaces might not be in existence, or alternatively a new set of individuals would meet with the same label attached to their presence.

### The future is bright, the future is orange? Sponsoring

"If you take 'no' for an answer, then you are in the wrong business." Which business would that be? Yours or the one you rang up in order to receive equipment or money from for the next project? Bill Rubino, fund-raiser at The Life Foundation from Stockholm was

talking straight, and rightly so. Sponsorship from private industries seems to be gaining in importance for artistic practice as 'match funding' —a requirement to generate income from other sources to match with public funding —is the term on everybody's lips. New funding policies of the European Union as well as the Soros Foundation for the remaining part of Europe that include match funding criteria means that money coming from the private sector has become a necessary source of income. Despite the ethical issues at stake, there is an immense interest amongst artists to understand what makes industry tick, and then pull the right levers. Rubino, addressing the nature of the presentations at FESARS, stated: "all of you were given five minutes for your presentations. Most of you went over time and most of you failed to provide a clear outline of what it is you are doing, why you are doing it, and —in relation to receiving money —what it is you could do for them." Apart from the fact that FESARS was not a sponsorship drive, it would seem artists working in artist-run-spaces not only need to adjust themselves according to the bureaucratic necessities within their organisation, they now apparently also need to develop additional skills in order to sell their products, this is after going through the process of 'understanding' —that is aligning —their work as product oriented.

There has always been an ongoing debate about accepting private money. The ethical issues at stake for the integrity of politically motivated art are just too sensible to be messed around with, one could think. On a more pragmatic level it has been argued that public funding is just easier to deal with. With private funding you are just complicating the issues as they want to get something more material out of the deal.

Both arguments could be justified to an extent. Within the political framework that comprises of the most recent 'Europe at War' spectacle, governmental money could be perceived as ethically questionable by default. In addition, the money for governmental art funding is not being printed inside the funding institutions themselves, there being a direct economic link between art subsidies and industrial development. As it is, 'culture' is formulated as a luxury commodity within economically developed countries and as restricted public funding for the arts has reached a point of saturation —beyond the simple question of re-allocation of resources through further governmental

intervention —in place of governmental support there is now a calculated drive to support through private sources. In this environment the concept of 'attention economy' has truly reached private industry. If you take a closer look at the activities of companies such as Glaxo Welcome you quickly arrive at the depressing conclusion that they tend to buy or support anything that will carry their name, however controversial it might be, simply for the sake of attention. And for them that makes sense. When dealing with dodgy ways of making money, the company can easily use art to associate itself with a critical platform of debate, so connecting their own product line to the process of discourse while maintaining a safe distance from any self questioning, as such having little to lose. Critical work bought by the person you intend to throw a brick at says more about the art system than the company. Keep on moving...

#### **Artist-Run-Spaces, Unite!**

At the end of the weekend there were clear plans to continue the tradition born through the event. What form such a continuation should take is unclear at this present moment. There were thoughts to carry the initiative towards East Europe, but it might be just as interesting to carry it South. At this meeting the constellation of spaces present did represent the wider network of where it was held, Stockholm in Scandinavia. In doing so FESARS managed to stay realistic. Any attempt to plan such a European wide event and keep the question of equal representation in mind would be bound to fail. So the further development of this loose network will mainly need to deal with issues of inclusion on an organisational level. Given the reality that most of the participants will have changed their commitment by the time the Second ESARS takes place, and most likely that some of the organisations will have ceased to exist as well, the continuation of this seminar will depend on the outline which it intends to give itself. This year in Stockholm a grand gesture was made. The next step would possibly require what had been stated earlier about the reality of artist-run-spaces: Institutionalisation. With the bureaucratic burden which would come out of such a European network, the most essential objective would be the definition of a clear purpose, and the development of a pragmatic way of how to achieve this.

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