

2: The alternative, the avant garde and the artist-run space

Introduction

This chapter provides a context for my research questions; a theoretical and very schematic background to the history of the ‘alternative space’ for art, based on published sources. I review theoretical and practical writings; criticisms, accounts and definitions of ‘alternative space’, ‘avant-garde’, ‘alternative’ and ‘artist-run’, to identify major critical issues in writing on these themes, particularly on the avant-garde after the ‘end of the avant-garde’. By comparing these terms, I show that although much critique of the ‘alternative’ has drawn from concepts and attitudes developed in critiques of the avant-garde, these do not explain the ‘alternative’. The sources that discuss the alternative are concerned predominantly with themes of mutual support, autonomy/agency for artists, site-specificity, resistance to commodification and radicalism. However, critics who are concerned with residues of the avant-garde are concerned with the absence of radicalism, socially active art, and the audience and spectator. By comparing these sources, I consider whether, as the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber proposes, avant-gardism has tended to be a theoretical discourse about strategy, whereas the alternative has tended to be defined (by practitioners) as an ethical discourse about practice and to consider, also as he suggests, that the organisational practices used in alternative organisations have more in common with anarchist principles than with traditional Marxist theories of the avant-garde. At the end of the chapter, I set out ideas of radical temporality and critical space, which form a background to the thesis. In my

thesis, as I show in the following chapters 3, 4 and 5, where I have used art ephemera as the primary source, I understand the operation of the idea of alternative space to be found not just in how spaces are set up and run but to involve art practice as a whole. There are, of course, many alternatives. The ‘alternative’ may be a state of dialogue with dominant conditions, rather than of opposition to them. In this chapter I begin to set out my contention that the idea of ‘alternative space’ remains operative in complex ways.

Definitions of ‘alternative’ space

I have compiled the following generic description of an alternative/artist-run space by repeating the elements common to many definitions. I follow this by discussing the literature this description is based on, in more depth, in order to begin to draw out the complexities of what alternative spaces are and have been.

An alternative space might be set up provisionally on a shoestring, possibly in a recession and would be likely to re-use a building that was redundant for the building’s original purpose, in a run-down area. The new use would not obliterate the aesthetic of the original use. It might be both living and exhibition space.

The space might make it possible to show innovative art in new mediums, non-objective ideas, unpurchaseable or dangerous work, process based art etc., and be fundamentally non-commercial or not-for-profit, but work would usually be for sale. It would provide artists with an opportunity to show outside the commercial gallery system. It would probably depend on art-world patronage, and participate in the ‘farm system’¹, and artists might be running two-part careers. The institution itself however would not build up a collection. Artists would have control over the presentation of work, if curators were involved, they would not be invested with elitist or exclusionary power, as those involved might intend to

¹ The ‘farm system’ or ‘farming’ is a phrase used to describe the tendency for established commercial galleries and curators to systematically identify young artists from their activities in ‘alternative’ sector in order to buy their work and/or offer them opportunities to develop their career in the established sector, see Martha Gever (1984) Grant Kester (1993), Martin Vincent, (2005).

counter these conditions and make institutional change. Those involved might also be involved in action on social and political issues. They would form a mutual support network both intellectually and practically, often providing facilities, usually running as a collective. For political reasons, or in order to be eligible for funding, it would be organised as a group, and would encounter itself becoming an institution, and might become a charity, probably educational. It would apply for temporary public funding and this would mean it developed a bureaucratic structure, but artists would continue to act in decision-making roles. It would become involved in community development or in providing education to a wider group. The organisation might become institutionalised as a 'service organisation'.

It would come to an end, as the bureaucratic burden became too much work, or people became involved in other things, or the lease ran out, or funding ran out, or it would continue and get more substantial funding and perhaps set up a Friends scheme. In any case, the surrounding area would have become 'gentrified', so the building might be taken over by a restaurant or converted to apartments.²

There is an extensive but fragmented literature on the 'alternative' art movement consisting of reviews and conference papers etc. Much of the accessible literature describes activities in New York. At the time of writing, there is no comprehensive history of the phenomenon of alternative and artist-run spaces in London. Until the publication in 2004 of *Alternative art New York 1965-1985: a "cultural politics" book for the social text collective*, edited by Julie Ault, there was no comprehensive, critical survey of the alternative or artist-run space in New York. Ault's book was compiled as an extension of ideas in the catalogue from a 1996 exhibition *Cultural economies: histories from the alternative arts movement NYC* held at The Drawing Center, New York. As Catherine de Zegher says in the introduction:

The original catalogue published at the time of the exhibition contained a selection of previously published articles mapping the alternative arts movement through the words of its contemporaneous interpreters – namely, critics... (The second book comprised of commissioned essays, many by key figures in the

² This is not a quotation, it is a description compiled by the author as a generic citation.

movement, ...takes a directly interpretive approach, bringing new insight to the project through the benefits of time and critical distance. (de Zegher, 2002, vii).

The writers are people who were involved in various alternative spaces. Julie Ault herself was a member of Group Material. In her introduction Ault says that she was ‘Struck by the fragmentary nature of available information, the few books on the alternative arts arena, and the lack of examination of the underlying philosophies of the field’ (Ault, 2002b, 1). She gives references to published histories with wider coverage and to literature on the “underlying philosophies” of concern to politically committed artists at the time. The study covers a chronology of selected alternative structures, spaces, artists’ groups, and organizations in New York City, 1965-1985. Much of the research uses documentation produced at the time as primary source material.

Ault lists some of the disparate and sometimes contradictory qualities of the ‘alternative’ mission to be “one that considers the roots and missions of organizations claiming to fill a particular kind of void; to counter the status quo of mercantile circuits; to address needs of artists and audiences not addressed elsewhere; or to define themselves as antiestablishment, anti-institutional, experimental, artist-initiated, artist-run, artist-centered, or any combination of the above” (Ault, 2002b, 14). Ault is my central authority, in this research, because she manages to link disparate and contradictory views, in her representation. The structure and methodology of the book support the principles of the alternative arts movement: “The book recounts and analyzes histories from multiple perspectives.” (Ault, 2002b, 5). I used her list of qualities of the ‘alternative’ as a starting point for this aspect of my research, partly because most of these aspects resurface in different accounts, partly because she asserts the radical intentions of the

participants rather than, as many writers on the subject do, emphasising the pragmatic reasons for such activities. Ault writes elsewhere of the importance of explicitly political aims, but does not refer to them in this summary, although she does set out ways in which radical intentions affected the institutions themselves. Ault's idea that organizations claim to fill a particular kind of void is an intriguing spatial metaphor which reminds me of the need to 'exit' found in ephemera from London in the period of my research: also a spatial metaphor in which the space remains undefined.

Providing mutual support is a common ethical and pragmatic motivation for artists who set up alternative spaces and one criteria for identifying spaces as alternative. In Batia Sharon's research on spaces in the San Francisco area in the 1970s *Artist-run galleries: a contemporary institutional change in the visual arts* (Sharon, 1979) she uses sociological rather than ideologically driven analysis of what constituted 'alternative' galleries.

Mutual support is identified by Sharon as the most important aspect of establishing alternative spaces to the participants, in the forms of mutual support networks, providing facilities for other artists and making opportunities to show art outside commercial galleries. The beginning of the alternative space phenomenon in New York is described by Phil Patton (1977) in "Other voices, other rooms", published in *Art in America*". He says that SoHo was the cradle for early "artist-oriented 'service organisations'" such as 112 Greene Street, The Kitchen and PS1. Patton says that the spaces arose as alternatives to the museum and commercial gallery situation in New York in the 1960s and identifies mutual support as important; he says that the first alternative spaces in New York saw themselves "primarily as service organizations", they provided display and studio space and other resources for artists often on a collective model and tended to start informally.

Kostalanetz (2003) has identified SoHo at that time as an artists' colony, as his own photographs, published in his history of the period, show. Papers and documents from a seminar run by The Visual Artists' Organisation (1986) "The Visual Artists' Organization: past, present, future."³ The seminar was attended by 42 invited participants and assembled in consultation with the National Association of Artists' Organizations (NAAO), the NEA Visual Arts Program, the New York state Council and others. Its purpose was to ascertain concerns of the field, and it is, therefore, a reflection on what was by then a substantial history of artists organisations in the U.S.A., so has been useful as a summary of key issues, at a different time and in a different place. Trend (1986) identified the support network role of alternative spaces as most important, to the artists, not only for practical support, but also to be "a support structure that encourages dialogues crucial to the refinement and extension of their ideas"(9) in his introduction to the papers of the conference. The aim of providing mutual support is related to the aim of strengthening the participants' sense of belonging to a group, or community, of acting collectively. Patton sees a strong motivation being that artists wanted to have primary control over the presentation of their work. He says these spaces in Soho in the late 1960s were artist-oriented, and there was often little distinction between living and exhibition spaces. They were spaces for innovation, the new mediums of performance and video required different space. Generally they reflected non-commercial and non-objective ideas, they did not sell work and they did not build up collections in the way commercial galleries or museums did.

³ *Afterimage*, vol. 14, no. 3 (October 1986) 9-17, to be referred to as *VAO*.

Collective models of institutional organisation have been used. Ideally, collectively run institutions would embody the aims of the participants, for example using consensus rather than voting as a way of making decisions. Lucy R. Lippard, in Ault (2002), in her essay in section 3, *Context; Biting the hand: artists and museums in New York since 1966* Lucy R. Lippard “chronicles collective methods employed by artists to counter exclusionary and elitist practices in contemporary art museums and to ensure their rights to control their work and its distribution.” (Ault, 2002b, 5). They wanted to produce the context for art, so were concerned with the intention to critique, and to change, institutional structures. However, this concern with the nature of institutions sometimes became subsumed in the process of becoming an institution oneself. *VAO* (1986) includes a short report by Stephen Kahn based on his PhD. *Communities of faith, communities of interest* contrasts idealistic early aims with pragmatic concerns of the present (1986). His overall conclusion is that problems of the present were problems of how to deal with the institutionalisation that the organisations had become bound by. Originally “provisional entities with nothing to lose”, as they continued and grew, as Patton too had mentioned, they developed planning and documentation systems that matched the structure of funding applications. He seems to advocate assimilation of growth of bureaucratic structures within organisations. *VAO* also includes a paper by Judy Moran and Renny Pritikin *Some thoughts: artists organisations contrasted to other arts organisations*. The conference as a whole dwelt on the importance of keeping artists in decision making roles, on management boards, on the question of whether administration and art working are compatible, and on keeping the work of the organisations relevant as more non-artists were involved. The list of important issues for the future compiled by attendees

concentrated on increased awareness of and involvement in social and political issues. It is not surprising that there was objection to Kahn's presentation, as an organisation pre-occupied with navigating existing bureaucratic structures is no longer one that embodies radical intentions. I will address the question of self-institutionalisation in practice in chapter 4.

The aesthetics of alternative spaces are significant, and one way in which site-specificity becomes important in the practice (the other way being in the practice of institutional critique, which I consider below). Nancy Foote says that the developing site-specific installations and project work required "crummy" spaces. In *The apotheosis of crummy space* (1976), a review of the first show at PS1 and of the aesthetics of site-specific and installation art, she observes that work shown in alternative spaces which were often industrial buildings could be gestural, unpurchaseable and dangerous (Matta Clark for example).

Another defining characteristic of alternative spaces is that they provide a place to show apart from commercial galleries. They may not, however, be set up in opposition to the commercial gallery sector. Martha Gever (1984) in *Growing pains*, a NAAO conference report warned of the tendency for "alternative organizations .to become little league trainers for the elite cultural establishments" and Grant Kester (1993), also describes this phenomenon, calling it the "farm system." Foote (1976) notes that alternative spaces and established museums had begun to develop interdependent relations, pointing out that by 1976 museums such as MoMA were sidestepping the issue of housing dangerous work, but supporting the work, by organising projects outside their own premises. PS1 itself

was eventually taken over by MoMA in 1999, one instance of a shift from an alternative position to collaboration with an established art museum. Although Gever and Kester are critical, such interdependence seems to me to be a default state of a varied milieu. What research there is on the economic situation of the artist in the UK, see Brighton et al (1985) and Hetherington (1994), indicates that art careers are in general unstable, artists are dependent on taking up a range of different kinds of usually temporary financial opportunities. As I discuss in chapter 4, such dependencies may be considered part of the work, or context of the work, and used critically.

The most prevalent themes in the definitions of alternative space I have reviewed above are: mutual support, autonomy/agency for artists, space for innovative art forms, resistance to commodification and radicalism. I will return to these themes in the following chapters. They are not separate or distinct. Artists' agency, the aim to provide mutual support and to prove alternative forms of institutional organisation I see as the need both to problematise mainstream forms of institutional organisation and to produce alternative institutional models, opposition to commodification refers to the need to problematise the status of art as commodity and to use alternatives to existing mercantile circuits and the 'farm system'), the fate of radicalism is connected to the question of whether the alternative is oppositional and the question of the relationship between art and politics.

More recent literature from around 1996 onwards reflects the erosion of the assumption that it is possible to hold a position that is 'alternative', in the sense of being in opposition to, or counter to, a predominant cultural establishment. Essays in Ault's (2002b)

Mainstreaming section comment on the consequences of adaptations and liaisons with ‘mainstream’ institutions and structures, indicating the contingency of oppositional strategies and the consequent leaking of ‘alternative’ force. Along with such partnerships, public funding had sustained alternative and artist-run spaces. The consequences of this are described in three existing case studies concerned with artist-run spaces in Glasgow in the UK: Nesbit (1996), Dickson (1998) and Hunter (1997). I consider these, and the points they raise with regard the situation in London in 1996-2006 in chapter 4. By the late 1990s, the kind of artist’s organisations that would once have been alternative were recognised and encouraged by the ‘establishment’. Rather than see this as a repetition of the ending of the avant-garde, I will now consider what traces of the alternative remain.

Terminology and categorisation

The three terms most often used, in the period after ‘the art historical end of the avant-garde’, to define the category ‘alternative’ are: *avant-garde*, *the alternative* and the *artist-run space*. There is some crossover between these as defining terms, but there are also differences, they reflect different allegiances and ideological positions. I follow these terms with alterity, an idea which although it only appears unnamed as resistance to definition or archive in the literature on alternative space, or the avant-garde, is closely related to the idea of the ‘alternative’.

Avant-garde

The concept of the avant-garde was formed by Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825)⁴ . Saint-Simon was a French utopian socialist, an acknowledged influence on Karl Marx and, with Comte, a founder of modern social theory. He wrote after the French Revolution and the industrial revolution and was concerned with what had gone wrong, why there was so much violence and little social cohesion. Near the end of his life, he created a new religion, called the ‘New Christianity’ as a solution to this problem. In this religion, artists were to play the role of spiritual leaders in society. It is a story often told. Egbert says that Saint-Simon:

..sought to give artists the leading role in the forthcoming good society. This he did by placing them at the head of an elite administrative trinity consisting of artists, scientists, and industrialists-artisans. And in expressing the conceptions of an artistic avant-garde and of a social vanguard, conceptions so important for the history of modern art and of modern social radicalism alike, former soldier Saint-Simon made use of the word “avant-garde” to convey them. (1967, 342).

The idea that art should be socially useful, didactic and easily understood was current in the late 18th century (Egbert mentions Diderot, David & others). Saint-Simon intended that in his ‘good society’, government would eventually be reduced, which as Egbert

⁴). In 1967, Donald D. Egbert, a professor of art and archaeology at Princeton who had written on social radicalism as it affected the arts, published an article called ‘*The idea of “avant-garde” in art and politics*’ (Egbert, 1967). He poses the question “How is the decided lack of agreement among devoted Communists concerning the proper nature of avant-gardism in art, and its relation to politics, to be accounted for?” (3), in replying to his own question he says that “It has never previously been pointed out, I believe, that the figurative use of the word avant-garde to denote radically progressive leaders of both art and society - can be traced to Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825)”.

points out is an ultimately anarchistic idea, but one influence on Marx's conception of the classless society. Diverse writers have pointed out that, in spite of this anarchist idea, Saint-Simon was to be in many respects an ancestor of the Marxian varieties of communism, whilst it was Charles Fourier who was to be an ancestor of modern (communist) anarchism, and that, throughout the 19th century, artists' movements such as the 'art for art's sake' and Bohemian movements, and many individual artists (Seurat, Pissaro etc.) were anarchists or had Fourierist sympathies. (Egbert, 344, Graeber, 333). Saint-Simon, conceived of society led by an elite, whilst Fourier described a decentralized society and government in small, closely knit, federated communities, or "phalanxes" and this point, the intrinsic elitism of Saint-Simon's vision, discouraged many artists who preferred to envision an individualist, autonomous, voluntary though radical social role to artists.

Carlyle is cited in the OED⁵ to have been the first to use "vanguard", in the sense of avant-garde, in English in 1831, in place of the earlier "van". Egbert notes that he had been in contact with the Saint-Simonians at that time. The idea of a political vanguard, or avant-garde, was used widely in the 19th century. In 1848 a radical newspaper called *L'Avant-garde* was published in Paris and later radical newspapers, for example, often called themselves 'avant-garde'. Poggioli (1968) cites Baudelaire on the military origins of the term, in 19th century France. Graeber (2001) points out that it was Marx who began to significantly change the idea of the vanguard, by introducing the notion that the proletariat were the true revolutionary class, because they were the most alienated. The

⁵ Oxford English Dictionary

term avant-garde is, according to Graeber, not used in the Communist Manifesto of 1848, but the idea of the political vanguard is; here isolated from the artistic vanguard. The idea of a vanguard, or ‘avanguardia’ party organising that most oppressed class is outlined by Lenin in *What is to be done* published in 1902 (New York, 1929, 85). However, rather than a political vanguard leading the way to a future society, many radical artists of the 19th century saw themselves as exploring new and less alienated modes of life, and many had anarchist sympathies. Opposition to the official art academies as institutions of centralised power, emerges, as do the principles of autonomy, self-organisation and mutual aid, which reappear as strategies of ‘alternative’ spaces in the late 20th century. These are basic principles of anarchism, rather than of Marxism however. The legacy of the early 20th century avant-garde art movements overshadows this (anarchistic) avant-garde trace. Graeber (an anarchist anthropologist), analyses avant-garde groups as types of organisation, and points out that groups such as the Dadaists, the Futurists and the Surrealists “organised themselves like vanguard parties, publishing their own manifestos, communiqués, purging one another and otherwise making themselves (sometimes quite intentional) parodies of revolutionary sects.” (334) The most extreme example he gives of what he calls “insane sectarianism” is the Situationist International.

The term ‘avant-garde’ has, as it has had since its beginning, two commonly used meanings. These meanings are different, and may operate in opposition to each other.

Paul Wood has outlined this duality:

The term ‘avant-garde’, in normal contemporary usage, carries a range of broadly positive connotations, of being stylish and ahead of the game, of widely espoused values such as individualism and originality....Perhaps less widely grasped, but ultimately more serious, is that connotation of avant-gardism which implies

criticism and opposition, dissent, from a status quo of inequality and oppression. (Wood, 2000, 257)

In addition, a trajectory from isolation to assimilation is prescribed here by Asger Jorn in 1956, representing the Nordic SI faction at the first World Congress of Free Artists:

There are two conditions that apply for a movement to be called avant-garde, in the first place it must be isolated, without direct support from the established order, and given over to an apparently impossible and useless struggle... Next, the struggle of this group must be of essential importance for the forces in whose name it struggles – in our case human society and artistic progress – and the position conquered by this avant-garde must later be confirmed by a more general development. (Jorn, 1998. 26)

Although participants are often wary of the term, alternative galleries are often criticised as a kind of avant-garde practice. The concept of oppositionality, which Joanna Drucker (2005) identifies as coming from theory of the avant-garde, underlies much contemporary criticism. The term avant-garde continues to be used in sociological research, for example, John Myles (1997) in his PhD thesis *Postmodernism and cultural intermediaries: a qualitative study of the English art world* cites four ‘types’ of avant-garde, as defined by Jencks. Myles uses Bourdieu’s ‘fields’ theory to carry out a qualitative analysis of interview texts from representatives from the ICA, Acme, Space, Bank, Cubitt Street, and The Agency, all originally artist-run organisations. Jencks’ categories of the radical avant-garde, purist avant-garde and post-avant-garde, as employed by Myles, describe the fluctuations of transgression and assimilation by mainstreams in the role of avant-gardes in society, and for this reason, remain relevant in a sociological context. The term is used in arts administration, for example in the report commissioned by the Arts Council *Taste buds : how to cultivate the art market* by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, a diagram is included in which ‘avant-garde’ art is diametrically opposed to ‘most art’, on the basis that it is more innovative and more critical. It is more

usual in art historical literature and contemporary art criticism to qualify the term as ‘historic avant-gardes’. Although it remains a commonly used art historical term; ‘Avant-garde’ is the standard subject heading in library and archival catalogues, particularly in the U.S.A. (for example, the digital project *Archiving the avant-garde* of 1999, see chapter 7), the use of ‘avant-garde’ as a category can be criticised.

The ‘avant-garde’ was originally conceived as an elite group, it originated as a military term describing the strategy of advancing into new areas, and is tied to the idea of progress in time: it refers to Adorno’s theory of ‘radical temporality’. The story of the avant-garde, or the two avant-gardes, the artistic and the political, is relevant because the idea of the vanguard as a group of elite radical intellectuals who can analyse society, develop the correct strategy to make a new, good society, and lead the masses to it, and the idea of an artistic avant-garde were formed together and have remained intertwined. The distinction of ‘avant-garde’ into a modernist avant-garde, which seeks an autonomous sphere, and a political/revolutionary avant-garde, which aims for real change, is no longer adequate, but the associated notion of artists as innovators clings to cultural and social theory. In this discussion, I have explained the dual history of the term avant-garde and shown that it is problematic to assume that it is appropriate to apply it in this context. However, in the section ‘Residues of the historical avant-garde’ I review many aspects that do remain relevant.

Alternative

The word ‘alternative’ is also a contentious term. Diverse alternatives are commonly substantiated as ‘the alternative’ and following this, the phrase ‘alternative space’ has

been used to mean a space which houses or symbolises 'alternative' intentions.

Categorisations of the 'alternative' are usually allied to the aspect of avant-garde described by Wood as "criticism and opposition, dissent, from a status quo of inequality and oppression". Raymond Williams' definition of 'alternative' in *Keywords* (1988) explains another complication in the 'alternative' as a category, that if an 'alternative' position is in critical dialogue with dominant ideology, in contrast to an 'oppositional' position, a degree of negotiation is implicit.

The expression 'Alternative space' is reported to have been coined by NEA's artist director Brian O'Doherty (Wu, 2001 quoting Patton) and (Beck, 2002) and was used to describe an NEA funding category from 1977-1980. A statistical table giving the NEA history of funding for Visual Artists' organizations 1971-1986 is reprinted in VAO (1986). From 1971-1976 it was called 'Workshops', 1977 'Workshops/Alternative spaces', 1980 'Artists' spaces', 1981 'Artists' Spaces/Workshops', 1982-1986 'Visual Artists' Organisations'. Julie Ault said that in New York in 1996 the term 'alternative space' had some currency, but that by 2002 this had gone.

This history shows the term used pragmatically, but that alternative space is a discursive category, is shown by Julie Ault when she gives a 'definition' of alternative that encompasses a disparate and contradictory set of demands and constituencies, with some commonalities. 'Alternative' is a contentious category. The 'alternative' is closely connected to the possibility, or impossibility, of holding a critical position. An 'alternative space' may be considered as a 'critical space' but it is questionable whether a

critical 'alternative space' can exist and even if it can, the concept of 'alternative space' is problematic. Ault explains this when she says:

Use of the terms 'alternative', 'marginal', and 'oppositional' have historically been regarded as problematic by participants in the arena because these terms inscribe and promote a hierarchical understanding of the art field as a system." (Ault, 2002, 4)

The very act of explaining 'the alternative' reproduces the hierarchies it is meant to diminish or address, she suggests. Ault advocates a pluralist definition of 'alternative'.

While saying that she is concerned with the larger contexts art activities occurred in and the underlying philosophies of the field, she aims to establish written histories that derive from alternative and oppositional art culture, with analyses of their economic and political contexts:

The traditional methodologies and institutional structures of the art world have been fundamentally challenged in recent decades. During the 1970s and early 1980s, many artist-initiated alternative spaces and group structures were established as constructive responses to the explicit and implied limitation of this commerce-oriented world. Critical efforts to theorize representation as a contested arena and to create venues for self-representation and distribution were generated by and accommodated in these sites.(Ault, 2002b, 3/4)

She says that "For the sake of visibility and clarity, I find 'alternative' to be useful as a general term because it declares historical and critical relations between the structures thus classified and the then existing institutions and practices." (3-4). I cite Ault's definition of alternative in my use of the term 'alternative space' because I think that the state of being in dialogue with what it is critical of, does apply to the positions I am researching. They are art projects, made in the context of the 'art world', rather than, for example more politically motivated 'direct action' events also happening in the late 1990s. I want to use the term alternative, for the sake of visibility, and because I think it is productive to explore the arguments about what 'alternative' means.

Alternative spaces, as I will show in the next two chapters, are often criticised for not being oppositional. I think that this is partly because of the conjoined legacy of the term avant-garde and Marxist theory, particularly in an academic context. It makes more sense, I think, to compare ‘alternative’ organisations to anarchistic, artistic avant-gardes briefly outlined above, and to admit the element of negotiation in an alternative, rather than oppositional, position, in Raymond Williams’ terms, than to critique them in discourses based on Marxist theory. As organisations, they embody anarchist principles: autonomy, voluntary association, self-organisation, mutual aid, direct democracy. They reject, and form in opposition to, structural inequality and domination of the art world by established institutions. They are likely to use consensus as a way of making decisions, to see organisational structures as a way of managing diversity, rather than of imposing order.

Artist-run

The descriptions artist-initiated, artist-run, artist-centred, artist-led and other variations are used in this period to indicate the alternative space. Artist-run’ is a pragmatic definition, which reflects artists aim to influence the way their art is presented and emphasises artists’ agency. Rebecca Gordon Nesbit (1996) says that in 1996, amongst those she had talked to during research for *Live/Life*, an exhibition of artist-run spaces in the UK, the term ‘artist-run space’ was preferred to ‘alternative space’, with its outdated anti-Establishment connections. Use of the term artist-run in London in this period is considered in detail in chapter 4, together with the relationship between the concepts of ‘alternative space’ and ‘artist-run’ space. Ault says that “One tenet of the alternative arts

movement has been the merit of dislodging restrictive categorizations and hierarchies (of mediums, of types of cultural practice, and of identity structures)” (Ault, 11), and another based on “philosophies of self-representation and cultural civil rights” (Ault, 11). Neither of these ideas is strongly represented in London during this period, self-representation appears to be a pragmatic rather than philosophical aim.⁶ The term ‘artist-run’ inherits some characteristics from ‘alternative’, but has lost others, as I will show in this thesis.

Artist-run and artist-led and artist-initiated projects appear as categories in the Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT), the art historical thesaurus maintained by the Getty Research Institute (Getty, n.d.), for use in cataloguing art collections.

Alterity: oppositions to terminology and categorisation

As a category, the ‘alternative’ as a concept is inimical to the concept of categorisation for several reasons, its criteria are contradictory, its use is contentious and, through its theoretical link with alterity, it cannot be circumscribed. The definitions of ‘alternative’ I refer to above show that the criteria that may be used to identify an organisation as ‘alternative’ are not certain; for example, a project could be both conceived in opposition to current “mercantile circuits’ and be a commercial project (Sarah Staton makes this comment in an interview about her *Supastore*, see chapter 4).

⁶ See the self-written histories of the artists group Bank (2000) and artist-run gallery City Racing (Burgess, John et al, 2002)

The contradictory and contentious aspects of the ‘alternative’ remain present in the problem of ‘alterity’. The ‘alternative’ has no need for my archive, for the process of valorisation I put in place. I return to this problem in chapter 6, on collecting.

Residues of the historical avant-gardes and their failure

Literature on the period known as post-avant-garde, from around 1965 onwards, has created the background to critical writing that is contemporary to my research period. While ‘alternative’ remains a contentious term, avant-garde is impossible to use of art practice in this period, because of its associations with elitism and radical temporality; I investigate why here. However, I also review some sources that show the persistent residues of certain attitudes of the avant-garde visual arts that continue into the period of alternative art activities of the 1990s in London, whilst keeping criticisms of the term and its deployment present.

Changing of the avant-garde

In early critical writing on artistic avant-gardes, the art market and mass-produced cultural productions were seen as separate to art, and contaminating to it; identified by Greenberg as ‘kitsch’, Ortega Y Gasset as ‘entertainment’ and Adorno as the ‘culture industry’. This view reinforced the idea of a split between high and low (devalued) culture as Schusterman observes (Schusterman, 1998). However, theories of a post-avant-garde addressed this question, concluding that it was no longer possible to separate art from techniques and methodologies of mass-production. Rosalind Krauss’s argument with Greenberg (1967) on the avant-garde is summed up in the title of her book *The originality of the avant-garde and other modernist myths* (1991). She says that many

artists known as avant-garde were working with reproduced images, and were aware of their context, references and significations, so that originality was not the significant issue. Peter Burger (1994) uses the ideas of the work, the new, change, Benjamin's concept of allegory and montage (the method and effect of fragmentation in the work) to analyse the qualities of an avant-garde work of art that is compatible with the mass-production of culture.

The 'end of the avant-garde'

It is generally agreed that by the early 1960s, if not before, in the West, the avant-garde was part of official culture. Egbert (1967, 365) says that this claim was first made in print in 1963 by William C. Seitz; at that time Associate Curator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Seitz, 1963). However, the question of whether artists can and should be an elite vanguard of a radical, better society, germane to the history of the avant-garde, continue to be debated, particularly in relation to an extensive disillusionment amongst critics following revolutionary events around 1968.

Burger (1984) insists that acts in art have to be researched in their historical context, and questions the autonomy of art. The historical moment of his writing the influential *Theory of the avant-garde* in which he argues that the (engaged) avant-garde had failed, was one of extreme disillusionment. The avant-garde was "dominant but dead" he says. This period, 1968 and the early 1970s were the time of what is called by Altshuler (1989, Chapter 13) a "watershed" in the course of the avant-garde and avant-garde exhibitions, when it seemed that the days of the oppositional avant-garde were numbered following the failure of avant-garde involvement in actual political engagement in social

revolutionary actions in France and Germany, an observation linked to the fate of the Situationiste Internationale. Altshuler says of the participants of '*When attitudes become form*' in 1969 that they might not have called themselves avant-garde, but they were in spirit. He says that the public was eager for the new and unacceptable so making that avant-garde intent no longer transgressive. With this major art-historical breaking point in place, Altshuler identifies changes in the art-world following it. He says that the role of the curator in its contemporary sense began with Seth Seigelaub and Harald Szeeman and the '*When attitudes become form*' exhibition in 1969 (Szeeman and Harrison, 1969). Altshuler says that they "set the stage for the assumption of the artists's creative mantle" by curators. He sees this as significant phenomenon that grew throughout the remaining decades of the 20th century, together with a growth in commercial and institutional activity in showing art, and company sponsorship. Bauman (1998) suggests that the period defined above as 'after the end of the avant-garde' can be called 'post avant-garde'.

Burger and Bauman not only identify the 'end of the avant-garde'; they also, it seems as a consequence of its failure, reaffirm that art is a separate social sphere, a separate social system (in other words, art is autonomous). This view has, according to Burger a theoretical foundation in Weber and Habermas as the separation of spheres of activity, he says, mirroring Kant's division of thought. Bauman makes a similar observation. In his contribution to the discussion of curatorial strategies (1998) he says that the avant-garde has failed in its aim to spill art into life, described in his earlier work *Art as praxis* (1973). He insists that art's autonomy is always present now, as a constant given. Even works that are revolutionary are so only in the sphere of art, he writes. He says that this

restriction to the aesthetic sphere has been a historic containment, set up by Plato and reinforced by the enlightenment and Kantian thought; maintained by the theory that the aesthetic is an autonomous sphere. On the other hand, the “yoking of artistic creation to a definite program” of doctrine, revolution or utopia was already criticised by 1935 (by Andre Breton, quoted in Ardenne, 2000, p.9) as resulting in immobilisation. However, many of the practices I will consider in chapters 3, 4 and 5 evade this judgement.

Resistance to this view has continued, as I will expand in the following three sections, socially active art, Situationism and the audience and the spectators. I will give one direct comment here, John Timberlake reflected that “narratives of the left became scarcely coherent narratives of defeat and closure: this or that project, political, cultural or artistic, were declared to be in ruins, or at an end.”...”What remains fascinating about the nineteen nineties however, was the range of radical phenomena which resisted, by accident or design, the doleful rush by many *soixant-huitards* to close everything down”, in his essay in *There is always an alternative* (Timberlake, 2005). Opposition may not be understood in dialectical terms, but that does not mean it is no longer possible. After considering the literature cited here, I decided to limit my thesis to discussion of relationships to the avant-garde, after 1968.

Socially active art

The questions of how art could be socially active and how art and life could be integrated impelled the Situationist International. These were artists who took control of the production of their own ephemera. The influence of the historical avant-garde Situationist International movement, usually called the Situationists, or Situationism is recognised by many contemporary commentators: Matthew Higgs, who played a productive role in

London throughout the period, comments that Situationist tactics have been one of the most significant traits of the past ten years referring particularly to the giving of a social role to the artists (Higgs, 2000). Guy Debord (1957) in the *Report on the construction of situations* called for the need to establish a collective avant-garde. He wrote of creativity as a political energy, and the current “bourgeois control of culture” something that cut off the avant-garde tendencies from the segments of society that could support them. Asger Jorn described Situationism as revolutionary art in the sense that ‘value does not emerge from the work of art, but is liberated from within the spectator. . . . This is why art is socially disruptive and politically so important as an object in itself. (Jorn, 1998, 26). Iain Borden summarises the influence of Situationist practices: the construction of situations, the derive, psychogeography, ludic play, the Situationists’ ‘unitary urbanism’ (terms from Niewenhuys, 1996). However, the context has changed and with it an uncertainty of the efficacy of the critical precepts of the period has developed. This, together with reflection on the history of that movement itself, has led to re-evaluation of the legacies of Situationism. Iain Borden notes that “if Situationism is anything, it is only a set of tendencies and propensities” (2001, 133) although he sees problems in considering these tendencies as avant-garde now and sees these tactics as a form of useful critical urban practice. Being ever present, they enable criticism being “immersed in, and working against” (133). Borden says that the purpose is different in that individuals are no longer reduced to functionality in this society. Alistair Bonnett in his introduction to a text by Asger Jorn originally published by the Situationist International says that:

Jorn always held out for art though. He thought it important, that it could have a ‘spiritual’ content that subverted the alienated, instrumental world of authoritarian socialism and capitalism. Unlike commodity culture, he argued, art has the potential to be prodigal, continuously giving, excessive. (Bonnett, 1998, 8)

The use of formerly avant-garde methods (readymade; as critique of value of ‘auratic’ art object and as transgression, collage and bricolage, situationism, trash art) as ‘critique’ has been made problematic by theories of socially active art being vulnerable to ‘precuperation’.⁷ I consider the productive role of critique, transgression and pastiche in contemporary commodity culture, in chapter 5 ‘Counter to?’ where I look at the knowledge economy as context.

While conscious resistance is required in traditional oppositional strategies, the sociological understanding of acts, or of knowledge that is ‘performed’ question this assumption. In his influential work *The practice of everyday life* (1984) Michel de Certeau maps a history of “tactical” action in everyday life, by people who do not have access to the structures of power and are not in control; speakers of languages, readers, watchers, consumers; he gives a collection of words for this practice: metis (Greek), la parole (Saussure), habitus (Bourdieu) 'La perruque' which are used in what he calls “The practice of everyday life, network of an anti-discipline.”(4). Heinich (1999) sees a resemblance of art to “a sociology of acts”. Heinich, a sociologist, explains that sociological research is methodical, it can investigate the rules and collective constraints outside art but which are also internalised, so which are present in art. She uses the ethnographic method of ‘following the actors’ to analyse art practices. She explains that “sociology’s strong points: circulation, context, mediation, relations, institutions and ties” (Heinich, 1999, 74), are found in contemporary art practices, for example, socially engaged art practice. Ardenne, Beausse and Goumarre (2000) separate contemporary

⁷ (Auge’s term, 1995)

practice from ‘modernist’ striving for the new, the frontiers, and identify what they call “experimenting with the real” art as experience/experiment “context, becoming, provocation” as the continuation of the avant-garde (13). The exhibition *Democracy!* (2000) collected socially engaged art practice work, trying to see how a show of this kind of work could be curated. In an essay in the accompanying catalogue, Emma Mahoney suggests the word ‘demophony’, in contrast to Beuys’ democracy, to describe what she thinks these artists want to do, give a voice to people “give voice to their aesthetic judgement and self-representation” (*Democracy*, 2000, 40) in an attempt to bypass the existing structures of power. Situationism is a self-termed avant-garde, as can be seen from the citations given here. This key element is missing in contemporary practices that are seen as employing Situationist tactics. Criticism that traces the significance of art as a social act dealing with ‘voice’, or with public space is relevant because important to practices of psychogeography and to the idea of the temporary autonomous zone, of the 1990s, however in the later period, art exists in a similar context to, and uses similar tactics and methods as, other cultural activities. In chapters 3, 4 and 5, I will give particular examples. I do not however intend to engage with contemporary discourses on socially engaged practice, or relational aesthetics, as engagement in theoretical discourse on art movements is outside the scope of my research.

The audience and the spectators

Post-modern discourses refer to the failure of manifestos, work and theory of the avant-garde to consider the marginalised spectator. This is one possible way in which the ‘alternative’ is differentiated from avant-garde. Martha Rosler’s *Lookers, buyers, dealers and makers* (Rosler, 1979) is a call for artists to consider their audience and to be

conscious and active to “widen our opportunities to work with and for people outside the audiences for high art ... to rupture the false boundaries between ways of thinking about art and ways of actively changing the world” (331). Charles Harrison (1989) is critical of the “seductive rhetoric of those enchanted with the idea of the avant-garde or the ideally qualified spectator”, his point is that this view excludes what he calls the “marginalised spectator, disenchanted and paranoid” Harrison, 1989, 80). He goes on to propose that the autonomy of aesthetics may be seen as a useable abstraction, which makes criticism possible.

Institutional critique

Institutional Critique, in which interrelationships between artworks, the artist, and the museum are a focus, is an established critical practice, from the work of Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke in the 1970s, to Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson in the late 1980s onwards. The processes and tools of the museum are turned and appropriated, a methodology which has remained influential. Theoretical analysis of the social role of the museum and its staff forms another background element to practices of the late 1990s. Carol Duncan said that her “concern is with the museum experience itself - with the way that museums and museum art realize ideology (Duncan and Wallach (1978). In (1995, 128), she says that the “framing ambience of the museum insists on its meaning as ‘art’, often with such emphasis that other meanings fade.” Burger (1994) retrospectively observes that when Duchamp exhibited a urinal, that act not only changed concepts of artist and art object, but altered the institution of art so that it was perceived to be something created, not organic, commenting that “In the avant-gardiste work, the individual sign does not refer primarily to the work as a whole but to reality”(90). Such

arguments do not separate art from 'life', or society. Curatorial discussions such as those published in *L'expoition imaginaire* (Beer, 1989) and *Stopping the process* (NIFCA, 1998) focus on the spread of art outside the context of the gallery and away from the work of the artists as a counteraction to the autonomy of the art museum, a move which is, in this wider context, not necessarily critical.

Discursive space

Theoretically my research is positioned after post-modernism, and historically after the mainstream recognition of such art practices as institutional critique, site-specificity and the everyday, and after the re-evaluation of these practices, in art, in the early 1990s as in this example from a show at the Agency, in Deptford, 1993.

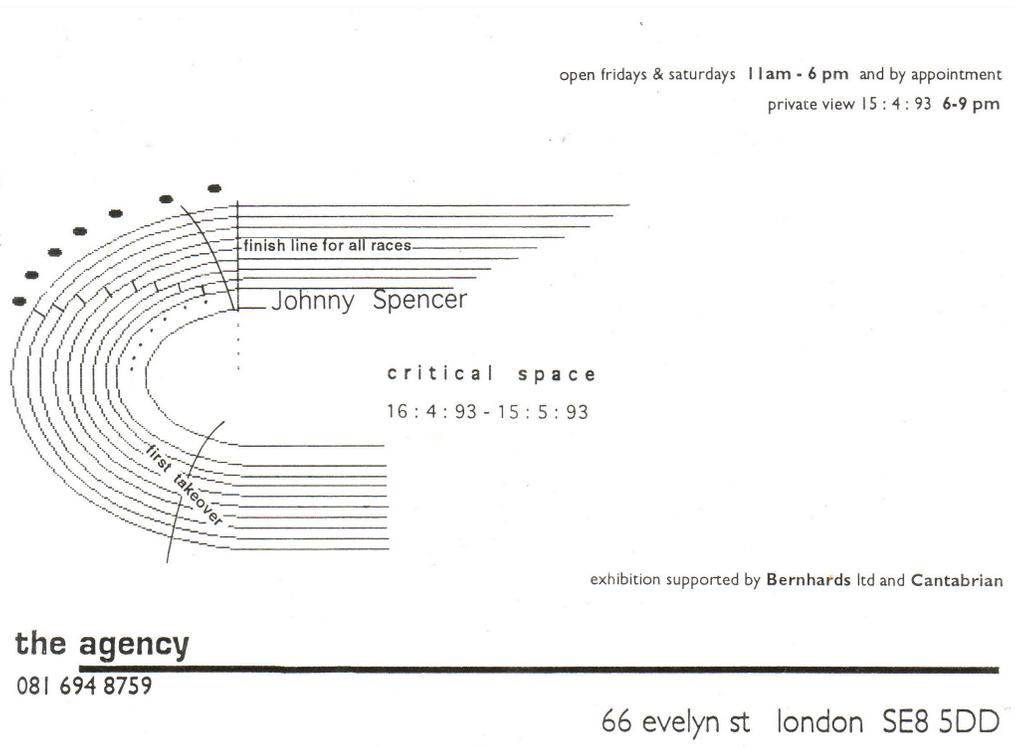


Figure 1: Johnny Spencer. *Critical Space*. 1993, card.

Juli Carson's reflection on what she terms "a shift in the sites of activism from the 'political' space of the physical institution to the 'discursive' space of representation" explains a development from the practices of institutional critique, where criticality is adopted by the institution. In 'On discourse as monument', her account of The New Museum, she says that "The New Museum sought to *formulate* a range of discursive practices rather than being ideologically fixed to a given aesthetic or striving to be monumental as an institution." (Carson, 2002, 142). This development recognised that conditions in the institution are the result of how the space is set up and run, both administratively and theoretically, and that this can be changed. She says that she sees what was done at the museum "in part echoed the writings of Guy Debord, translated to consider issues of femininity." Ault points out that in this way:

The proliferation of alternative structures through the mid-1980s can be portrayed as the legacy of cultural and political activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many founders of alternative art institutions derived their impetus from feminist models of critique" (Ault, 2002b, 5).

Alternative models of critique, particularly this feminist model in which a critical, or alternative space was made, establish the alternative space as both material and discursive space. I am interested in the diverse and contradictory qualities of complex alternatives, and think that synthesis of these into the alternative is problematic. In chapters 3, 4 and 5 I will look at the continuing operation of the idea of the alternative space, of consistencies that leap across times and specific places, to make other potential histories and of artists' agency in these questionable areas.

'Alternative' space and time

The question of the possibility of the 'alternative' is closely connected with the idea of criticality. It is impossible to avoid the theoretical problem posed by Fredric Jameson (Jameson, 1991) that in the post-modern condition "some of our most cherished and time-honored radical conceptions about the nature of cultural politics may thereby find themselves outmoded...which range from slogans of negativity, opposition, and subversion to critique and reflexivity...all presupposing 'critical distance' " (Jameson, 1991, 32-38). Outmoded, he says, because this is a spatial concept, but 'space' no longer exists. Outmoded also in effect because these practices may actually be productive of late capitalism in current Marxist terms, when knowledge is a register of production. Overtly Marxist aims and intentions are not necessary for all 'alternatives' of course, but many discussions of the issues are, as these are, framed by notions of opposition and collective consciousness⁸.

The theory of 'radical temporality' or "forces that clash within a history" which is part of the constitution of the avant-garde is derived from Adorno (Adorno, 1991). The trope has been used by Harris (1998) and Moeglin-Delcroix, (2001) to describe the link between ephemera and avant-garde art movements. Although ephemera often exists in that form because of a need to set out ideas or to communicate in a very contemporary time-scale, this categorisation of the manifestation of the material should not, in my opinion, dominate the understanding of its meaning. Moeglin-Delcroix (2001) focuses on the way

⁸ See Bickers (2002) and the special issue of *Third Text*, on art and politics, ed. By Dave Beech, (2002) for further explorations of this theme, an issue which represents very selective alternative positions, neglecting feminism and its legacies, and the possibility of individual counter-consciousness.

ephemera emphasise the significance of time over that of space, because they document short-lived events or announce future exhibitions. She says that they are connected to a particular time, “towards the timely rather than the timeless” and argues that this makes them “the most contemporary of the arts we call contemporary” (19). Mark Harris (1998) begins his essay on the rhetoric of press releases with Adorno’s idea of ephemerality as a structure for the power, or truth, of contemporary art’s ‘radical temporality’. This ‘radical temporality’ is based on the viability of an historical avant-garde, an ‘alternative’ presented in time, new or different, whereas my understanding is of space produced by a different consciousness, in which historical affiliations may be important. Problems with the term ‘alternative’ applied in this period come partly from an understanding of the political and social context of the conditions of a knowledge economy, with its endorsement of the role of the artist as an exemplary, innovative cultural worker, and whether opposition or even dialogue is possible in this state⁹.

The Marxist philosopher Lefebvre’s advice that a new space must be created, as the precondition of a new life (Lefebvre, 1991) in the form of ‘contradictory space’ is key to an idea of radical space, or critical space. This idea is useful in order to analyse the creation of ‘alternative spaces’ documented in some art ephemera (as both symbolic and material spaces). In contrast to Jameson, he proposes a simultaneous juxtaposition of space, rather than distance, as a critical strategy. Lefebvre sets out his “conceptual triad” of space, in the first chapter of *The social production of space*, ‘Plan of the present work’ (Lefebvre, 1991, 33). Art, he says, in this scheme usually creates ‘representational

⁹ I return to this theme in chapter 5.

spaces'; that are mere description, it inhabits "the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate." (39). To appropriate, or create space, it would be necessary to encounter the relations of production. His concept of social space is that it is not "an inert spatial medium where people and things, actions and situations, merely take up their abode" (296-7).

Addressing 'radical temporality', he says that ... "dialectical thinking has been bound up with time [rather than space]...forces that clash within a history..." but that this illusion of a neutral space is being dispelled only very slowly.¹⁰

Lefebvre calls appropriated or created space "contradictory space", or "differential space". This is the kind of social space that is key to my argument here, an image of space that I am introducing as a spatial way of seeing opposition, manifested as both a material and a symbolic space. Lefebvre's theory of space has been influential, for example Martin Beck cites Lefebvre, in an essay that links theoretical writing on the gallery spaces known as 'raw' space, and the 'white cube' with both the 'alternative' physical spaces of New York, 1965-1980 and with art concerned with space. Beck offers the conclusion that

It is now readily apparent that the alternative space movement, with its roots in the tumultuous upheavals of the 1960s, was contingent on the aesthetic, social, and political positions developed thereafter, and the tight interrelations between the material and symbolic spaces produced as part of that movement are clear indicators of that contingency. The alternative space as we have known it was, first, a time-based phenomenon, and second, it has, due to existing economic, political, and social conditions, become a thing of the past." (Beck, 2002, 276-7).

¹⁰ Published in 1974

There is considerable literature in the architectural sphere on the development of Situationist practices affecting space, for example in the *AD* issue “New Babylonians” (Borden and McCreery, June 2001), (the title taken from Constant Nieuwenhuys’ New Babylon project) changing reality by intervening in the production of space through the conscious and collective creation of an environment based on the possibilities inherent within the present, assertion of the ‘right to the city’. Space is understood in social and political terms as something that is produced and contested, as by Lefebvre. This kind of new space is found in the idea of the *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (Bey, 1991), but its effectiveness is undercut by the ‘non-place’ (Auge, 1995), as the radicality of time would be by ‘timeless time’ (Castells, 2000). Foucault said, in *The Order of Things*, that contemporary “disorder” is one of space, of no ‘common ground’, the table upon which, since the beginning of time, language has intersected space.” (Foucault, .2002, xix). Beck says that “the questions of what an alternative space is and what form it might take remain to be answered”. I speculate that fragmentation of space is one such alternative space, which I will describe by tracing the term ‘alternative’ itself, as a category. Contingent and disordered, embodying different expressions of the idea of unsustainable attainment, it may be that ephemerality is an essential quality of the ‘alternative’.