

Figure 1: The Tea Building, 2005

There are many alternatives and they all fail

The alternative is not categorisable, there are many alternatives, and this quality is anarchic rather than authoritative. A problem of presenting too coherent a history may arise when events from the past are re-presented. Ault avoids this by including essays which reflect profoundly different attitudes and histories but which have equal authority, in the project, exhibition and publication she led (Ault, 2002a).

Several shows presented histories or reminiscences between 2000 and 2005. *City Racing 1988-1998: A Partial Account*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 2001 and *10 years at Beaconsfield* in 2005 remembered single galleries. Both included elements of recreation. *The Top Room: retrospective* at the Chelsea Space also took place in 2005 was, a show that seemed to make an entity and a coherent history of something that seemed at the time a series of occasional events involving different people. Two shows which were intended to collect many alternatives into one space were *There is always an alternative* at Temporary Contemporary in 2005 and *fast and loose (my dead gallery): London 1956-2006* at Fieldgate Gallery in 2006.

In the introduction to the publication accompanying *There is always an alternative* the curators, Dave Beech and Mark Hutchinson, say that there are, of course, many alternatives. For the curators however, even the title reflects their political stance, being both a refutation of a Thatcherite quotation and an echo of Beech's often repeated opinions about art's autonomy and the possibility of a critical position summarised in chapter 2. The show was made up of artists who were known to the curators as being in some way 'alternative' in the 1990s. The curators wrote the artists' names, work details and how they knew them on the wall in pencil. Some work was from *that* time, others, as they said in statements in the accompanying publication, looked back on their work at that time and re-presented it in some way, as the 15 intervening years had changed the context for the work. The works seemed scattered and separate, but with less space between them, both more so than in 'warehouse' shows in the 1990s, like a second-hand furniture shop rather than a show, with everything facing different ways, in a kind of backward looking recreation of something in one place that was in many places. There was a lot of reading material. I wrote an essay for the publication, advocating the art library as an alternative space. Temporary Contemporary in Deptford was a top-floor space in a former industrial building, Seager's Distillery, demolished in 2007.

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Figure 2: Entrance to Temporary Contemporary, 2006

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Figure 3: *There is always an alternative*, 2006, installation

The curators of *fast and loose (my dead gallery)* Gary O'Dwyer and Pierre Coinde paradoxically represented the potential of many, but failed and past, alternatives by

giving them more space, more disparity, showing their documentation and statements of their intentions. The curators state:

Against the prevailing orthodoxies of their time either in subject, form, content or materials, they all existed in an underground relation to the cultural mainstream. As pioneers looking for a greater freedom, many were vociferous in their criticism of the art worlds they were finding themselves in. (Centre of Attention, 2006, and press release)

The curators comment that these spaces did not last: they failed, and they appreciate this aspect of the alternative, saying that they put on the show to encourage people to “fail again, fail better”.

Mapping London

Art ephemera represent the ‘art-world’ in overwhelming detail when considered as a critical mass, although this is a picture that remains partial. One way in which they do this is to map where events took place. This is a cognitive, as well as a geographical, sometimes psycho-geographical mapping. Although itself a fragmentary source, an ephemeron may be related to another, or to entities beyond the collection; the city of London as a space for art is something that this collection of ephemera relate to.

Ephemera may be used to reflect on the role of artist-run spaces in regeneration of urban areas and the local social, economic and political structure that help facilitate this (Zukin 1982). One technique used is pictorial mapping, found in items in the collection, showing the way that the art-world, or particular projects inhabit London.

A schematic river Thames represents London in the first two examples. David Shrigley’s map for *Life/live* uses silly drawings and speech bubbles to map artist-run spaces in London, as the schematic Thames. Anna Best’s leaflet for *Occasional sights: a London*

guidebook of missed opportunities and things that aren't always there, documents possibilities, designating public sights as art sites, temporarily. She has used the line of the Thames to indicate London, and in the leaflet names places and sights, which are occasionally present.

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Figure 4: 'Life/live', 1996, book jacket

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Figure 5: Anna Best. 'Occasional sightings', 2003, leaflet

Anna Best says “I gathered anecdotes, images, drawings and some interesting encounters and made a book , like a guidebook that works alphabetically by area, but almost an anti-guidebook in that many other things wouldn't be there if you went back to find them. I also didn't want the book to be seen as the end of the project, something too final, but a tool to use to explore London, or anywhere in fact, in a different way.” (Best, 2003).

Nils Norman's exhibition announcement for 38 Langham Street 16 May – 21 June 2003 folds out to an A4 poster *Proposed redevelopment of the Oval, Hackney E2, London Renamed: let the blood of the private property developers run freely in the streets of Hackney Playscape complex A*. This item clearly describes its context in its content.

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Figure 6: Nils Norman. Hackney playscape complex A, 2003, flyer/poster

The work involves mapping, research and communication of opinions. In the poster, the simple clarity of the diagrammatic illustrations of an adventure playground replaced by new buildings, counterpoise the fighting rhetoric of the title, which blames private

property developers. The message reasons, in a speech bubble, that “the economic function of the local area has superseded the broader social function” and there is some added information on sustainable energy. This work relates to a more extensive project to document all the public adventure playgrounds built in London, from their creation to their disappearance, now documented in a book (Norman et al, 2003). The poster presents information from his research, which is driven by his opposition to control of the urban environment by the interests of private property development, and is related also to the artist’s other work in which proposals are produced for organizational change, which do not come from the host organization. In this case, the space is there but the proposal is alternative.

Artists and institutions

The question of institutions and institutionalisation and the question of artists’ agency in institutions is a significant area of work. Ephemera can function as the voice of the institution. Publicity material conventionally uses logos and series to identify institutions and organisations. These conventions can be used, creatively and critically, to comment on ‘the event’ and ‘the institution’ and to describe tactical uses of such cultural forms.

Some organisations design their ephemera to show an institutional identity, and some like the commercial galleries Greengrassi and Sadie Coles HQ, have conceived their exhibition announcements as a series. Platform’s cards were designed by Secondary Modern and are like tickets.

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Figure 7: Platform, nos. 19, 2000 & 42, 2004, tickets/cards

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Figure 8: Platform, 2005

Platform gallery was run by Sheila Lawson who described it as a non-commercial project space. Neither she nor the designers are named on the cards. The accompanying press releases sometimes gives her name as a contact for further information. Platform, the institution, is presented as a series of platforms for artists' shows. The production of co-ordinated printed materials foregrounds the institution rather than the individual.

Shifting here from material spaces to consider the form of the institution itself as the work; the format of ephemera makes it possible for it to reflect nuances of institutional identity. Info Centre's cards and press releases and the series of magazines *Infotainment* were also designed as a series co-ordinated with other printed materials and were used as a way of communicating thoughts and ideas. The personal names of the hosts/editors/creators appear as authors, together with those of collaborators and participants in projects. The card for Space 1999 at Info Centre sends an invitation to have a drink of home-brewed beer, which is personal and sociable; the card describes the art event into which the receiver is invited. Although what you would find if you attended is not explicit in the card, if you had been to one event, you would know what they were like. Info Centre was a project that Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen ran for one year, in their home in London from 1999-2000. During that time, they produced six issues of a periodical newsletter and invitation cards for events in a consistent format.

Conventionally, the production of co-ordinated printed materials foregrounds the institution rather than the individual. Although the ‘series’ do foreground the institution, rather than the individual in this way, the personal way of communication in the ephemera reflects the ‘self-institutionalisation’ that was stated as an aim of the project, as did the location of the space in their home flat.

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Figure 9: Info Centre, ‘Space 1999’, invitation card

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Figure 10: Info Centre, former doorway, 2006

The process of institutionalisation has often been seen as an unavoidable problem, something that runs counter to the original aims of artists who set up artist-run organisations, as reflected in the accounts of the VRO conference, cited in chapter 2. However, rather than seeing institutionalisation as an outside process, Info Centre takes it on as the context of the work, something that can be worked with, rather than a threat, and this nuance is innovative in this project. The design of its ephemera contributes to their idea of the way their particular institution works, as in the illustration above, the Invitation to *Space 1999*, an announcement of an art event is combined with a social invitation to have a drink.

The card from *A political feeling*, announces a weekend of events at Cubitt, organised by Emma Hedditch. She puts her subjective self into the statement, it is an address, where she conjoins politics with feeling and hope, and a statement with intention. On the reverse, the text begins “for three days Cubitt gallery will become a feminist autonomous space...at least we will commit to that idea”.

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Figure 11: Emma Hedditch. *A political feeling, I hope so*, 2004, flyer
Emma Hedditch has taken herself (socially, politically, her way of working) to the space, temporarily replacing its own institutional identity. The (at least we will commit...) phrase is what for me describes the complexity in this example, it acknowledges distance, without lessening the integrity. The 'we' is fluid, there are different participants in the different events. Cubitt as an institution has made this change of space possible; its C logo is on the flyer. Cubitt is an artists studios and gallery, run by an annually changing committee of studio holders, with guest curators run shows for a fixed period. Hedditch adds another entity to the collective institution. This event took place during Emily Pethick's session as curator, recent announcements from Cubitt were series of folded A3 paper sheets that fold out to posters, so this has a different format to them. There was also a pamphlet published, with the same cover and a related poster.

Cubitt's gallery space in Angel Yard is inhabited differently in *A political feeling....*, it also temporarily hosted a different institution for the exhibition *Public Library*, curated by Emily Pethick and photographed here in 2004, for a show that was a collection of artist-published magazines which were displayed on tables and pegged on lines, so available to be read. *A political feeling...* documents inhabiting the space with a different feeling. During *Public Library* the building itself was labelled with a notice, to change the identity of the space, temporarily naming it a public library.

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Figure 12: Cubitt, during 'Public Library', 2005.

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Figure 13: Cubitt, 'Public Library' 2005, installation

Many alternative spaces or artist-run spaces are themselves short-lived, as institutions, of the 35 London spaces included in *Life/live*, as mentioned above, ten years later only 5 still existed. The role of institutions, and of self-institutionalisation, remained contentious throughout the period of research. There was a debate in *Art Monthly* during 2006 where Jakob Jakobsen, Lisa LeFeuvre, Peter Suchin and others discussed issues of the alternative and the art institution. The reader 'Art and its institutions' published later the same year (Montmann et al, 2006) examined the interests of the various institutions involved in the production and mediation of art, including collectives and self-organisation, and explored the impact these institutions have on the contemporary art world, reviewing 'institutional critique'. To set up an artist-run space may imply a critical position, through association with historical positions, but some artist-run institutions are more explicit about their critical position as an institution themselves. In the two exhibition projects associated with the project, *Spaces of conflict* and *Opacity*, Sofie Thorsen represented generic European artist-run spaces. Her work was a slideshow called 'We used to run an artspace just across the street from here' showing shop-fronts, similar to those seen in London, in a representation of the artist-run space as a genre, or category, a recognised kind of art institution. Stephan Dillemath also took part in that exhibition, and again reviewed his own influential storefront art-space Friesenwall 120 (see Dillemath, 1997) in Cologne (1990-1994), in the show *Make Your Own Life: Artists In*

and Out of Cologne at the ICA, Philadelphia with the work *Friesenwall 120 Ruined* (2006).

In these examples, as in the others referenced in this chapter, the institution is not seen as something separate to be investigated, but as part of practice. The perception of the institution appears in material manifestations, in documentation, which cite the well-known format of the now generic alternative space.