

The poetic title of *Blue Bridge 2003* suggests, like Clark's tune, the possibility of transcending present urban reality, but although the bridge balustrades are an optimistic sky blue, Cuthbert foregrounds rust bleeding through the paintwork. And crossing the blue bridge, one only arrives at a chaotic and looming clash of Tokyo's architectural styles.

Cuthbert's exhibition takes an ironic distance on various incarnations of the downtown, touching on social issues and the emptiness of urban space. However, his main achievement is to make an intelligent critique of the contemporary downtown as site for globally aestheticised tourist spectacle.

stuart solman



left to right: Simon Cuthbert, *City lookout*, 2003; *Eastcoaster*, 2003. Both type C prints, 84 x 104cm, edition of 6. Courtesy the artist.

situation: collaborations, collectives and artist networks from sydney, singapore, berlin

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The idea behind the exhibition *Situation* was inspired. Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) curator Russell Storer sought to bring to a much wider audience the work of artist-run spaces, and to focus on the contribution these spaces have made to the discourse and practice of contemporary art. Storer also sought to highlight the networked nature of artist-run initiatives (ARIs), by grouping within *Situation* three clusters of activity, based in Sydney, Singapore and Berlin. By braving the criticism that through this exhibition the MCA would effectively appropriate the institutional critique inherent in the ARI phenomenon, Storer provided an opportunity for this critique to be staged for a public beyond the artist networks themselves.

Nonetheless, the resulting exhibition was less satisfying than the theme. First, the accent was on documentation rather than on actual works; this was particularly the case with the foreign components, although several of the Sydney installations were primarily forms of documentation. The exhibition relied too heavily on text and archive that could not adequately capture the dynamism and chaotic creativity of ARI art. It would have been of great interest, for example, to re-create some of the wondrous installations gestated in artist run spaces, to bring some of the risk of those venues to the MCA. Second, there was insufficient rationale as to why these *particular* groups and artists were chosen to represent the extended and diverse ARI phenomenon (this lack of clarity was particularly stark given that the catalogue was not released until just before the exhibition closed). As a result, the exhibition gave a curiously narrow picture of the activities and politics of these spaces. One artist suggested that a review of this exhibition should use its word allocation to list the names of as many of the artists who have participated in artist-run spaces and associated networks in the past decade, to redress what appears to be an overly selective representation. Third, the exhibition could have benefited from greater emphasis on a historical frame to allow a more critical consideration of the impact of ARIs on contemporary art, and to acknowledge the debt the phenomenon owes to prior movements and initiatives.

The exhibition has to be credited, however, for the important gesture of acknowledging the centre's debt to the (often self-imposed and championed) margin. It reminded us of the many links between the perceived tiers of the artworld hierarchy—public museums, commercial galleries, art schools, artists of various generations and political and aesthetic persuasions, artist-run spaces—thus challenging the oft-repeated



Archive of Dud Slides, 2002. Group show organised by Simon Barney and Christopher Dean. Courtesy and © the artists.

assertion that ARIs are merely feeders to commercial galleries, places where artists rehearse for or poorly imitate the 'real' world of commercial and/or institutional 'success'. And it sparked some passionate debate: about the role of the artist in current times; about the most effective strategies for negotiating an artistic career; about how to reconcile one's personal and political objectives in art. One manifestation of this was the prolific posting on a blog established by one of the artists to encourage exchanges on the issues raised by the exhibited works, artist run spaces more broadly, and the institutional politics of a mainstream museum playing host to such practice. This ongoing discussion underlines one of the most significant roles played by ARIs: the provision of a network of peer support, where, for the most part, artists—whether or not they have commercial gallery representation or institutional careers—are afforded opportunities for exhibition, collaboration, and intellectual and aesthetic debate.

For this viewer, the most compelling aspects of the exhibition were within the local component. Jane Polkinghorne and Anne Kay's video record of 100 Sydney artists expressing their views on how they interpret their social role, on what it means to be successful, and on whether art has any traction in politics, was of particular interest (*Artist Archive*, 2004-05). It offered a curiously poignant community portrait

of professionals who, despite the still prevalent cliché of the artist as self-absorbed onanist, displayed strikingly acute powers of social observation, self-reflexivity and political concern, as well as great good humour. Simon Barney's *Briefcase* project (2002-05) and *No Ideas* (2005) captured many of the distinctive qualities of ARI art—collaborative, ephemeral, networked and not a little irreverent of the platitudes and pretensions that surround the art world. *Briefcase*, of course, could not restage its inherent performative element—where a work, be it sculpture, video or performance, would generate from a briefcase and the artist network would meet at a pub for its 'opening'—yet its concept was strong enough to cut through its lacklustre installation. The ever-evolving *No Ideas*, where over the course of the exhibition the artist responded to public requests about what to paint, displayed the wit and collective goodwill that represent the best of art born in ARIs.

Situation was a challenging brief for a curator. Whenever the centre pays tribute to the margin, some of the risk, critique, and creative mayhem of the original phenomenon is likely to be lost. And yet, there is still much to be gained from bringing the ideas and achievements of sub-cultures such as artist run spaces to a broader public, and from having such achievements in some way acknowledged by official culture.

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