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Seminars for Arts Professionals

OCTOBER SEMINAR SUMMARY

I DID IT MY WAY

Monday 19 October 2009

Australia Council, 370 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills

When I was twelve I got my first job. It was with the local pharmacy delivering medication to older ladies and gents using my bike for about seven bucks an hour – a ‘drug runner’ as I dubbed myself. Even though the work was not particularly well paid, the first pay packet – a whopping 21 dollars – might as well have been a chest of gold bullion. It was mine. I had earned it. It was a pertinent lesson about earning your own money. I realised that when you do it yourself, you don’t need to be answerable to anyone as to how you spend it - I now have an excellent collection of *Phantom* back issues to prove it.

And so it is with relying on government funding for income. While such funding may be useful, and not at all something to be taken for granted, it does come with obligations regarding how it is spent, and can also attract significant amounts of administration. The last SAMAG for 2009 brought together three representatives from organisations that, for varying reasons, have chosen to go it alone.

Panel

Stefo Nantsou – Zeal Theatre

Oliver Watts – Chalk Horse

David Handley – Sculpture by the Sea

Chair

Jo Dyer – Soft Tread Enterprises

Oliver Watts says that Chalk Horse, like many other artist-run-initiatives (ARIs), really began out of necessity. It’s a well known fact that in order to get shown, artists often have to take matters into their own hands. Instead of waiting around for their ‘big break’, Watts and some artist buddies made use of a connection they had with a gallery consultant. They managed to secure the consultant’s space in Darlinghurst over the summer while she didn’t need it. Over the course of the summer the group put on six small shows. When the consultant needed her space back, the group disbanded. Over the next few years the group, now known as Chalk Horse, acted as an amorphous curatorial collective, putting on a number of events and working on a number of projects for various groups and agencies such as the Historic Houses Trust and the City of Sydney. During this time the group used spaces around the city in an opportunistic fashion, including George Street Cinema, which they hired out for a video art evening. Watts describes the model as ‘parasitic’ (‘one who lives on the hospitality of others’) and says that it is a very cost effective way to exhibit without having the burden of fixed responsibilities such as rent. In 2007 the group took the plunge and established their own space in Surry Hills, where they specialise in promoting emerging Australian artists.

Watts admits that the initiative is far from profitable, and this is not particularly surprising. Very few artist run spaces are. The four founding directors work for the love of what they do and all have day jobs that help support them. What they have achieved however, is a predominately self-sustaining initiative. The fact that the group started off without a space might have something to do with this. By organising events and working on specific one-off projects, the group was able to maintain their autonomy from the arts funding agencies and build a reputation without many overhead costs. As with many other ARIs, initial funding from the government was crucial in allowing them to set up the space they now inhabit, however, as they developed, this funding has become a much smaller percentage of their income. Watts says that the group worked out quite early in the project that they only really needed two profitable shows per year to support themselves. A realisation like this may well lead to the temptation to put on ‘sure bet’ shows in order to increase income however, given that Chalk Horse’s focus is on supporting emerging artists and not financial profit, this is

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something they have avoided. If and when the group receive government funding, they use it to fund the more experimental aspects of their work.

Stefo Nantsou and three friends started Zeal Theatre in Newcastle in the mid eighties, putting on six shows in their first year. They have received very little government funding throughout their history, which was a conscious decision, made in order to avoid the inevitable administration that comes along with it. Nantsou says, and it's fair to say that most would agree, that the real pleasure to be found in the arts is in its creation, and the sharing of that creativity with an audience.

Part of the reason Zeal has been able to draw a steady income is their particular focus on education and work shows. Nantsou says that he sees the work that the company does as a product like any other; if the product you sell is good, then people will come back for more. After playing a few shows across a number of schools in the Hunter Valley area, they found that teachers would get them back to perform regularly. For quite a few years the company performed solely in the Hunter region. Another reason for their viability, Nantsou considers, is that they make the effort to meet people and network. He says that a simple handshake with the right person can open up innumerable opportunities. One such opportunity that Zeal came across was working with an Auckland based company on a series of shows across New Zealand. When they returned, Zeal was able to get Australia Council funding to return the favour, paying for the NZ company to come to Australia for a series of shows – one of the very few times the company has needed funding.

Nantsou says that if you wish to remain financially viable without government funding, close consideration needs to be made as to whether or not you need office space. Zeal is currently a company in residence at the Sydney Theatre Company. This is the first time in the company's history that they have had a dedicated work space to function out of. Nantsou has seen a lot of companies sign leases for a space, then expand to a larger space, and then when things are going well, expand to yet another larger space, only to find that, if business drops off, they are stuck with a liability they can't afford. As we have seen, Chalk Horse operated under a similar philosophy of caution for the first few years of their existence. Committing to a space is fairly inevitable for a visual arts organisation however, and Watts says that because Chalk Horse grew slowly, by incremental steps, they were in a more secure position to take on a space.

Along with a focus on educational performance, Zeal's income is drawn predominately through box office sales and performing at festivals. Nantsou says that earning income through performance gives them the freedom to not have to worry so much about the heavy administrative burden that comes from relying on government funding.

While Nantsou and Zeal consciously steered away from government funding for fear it would take their attention from their core business, David Handley and Sculpture by the Sea's history of powering on with little to no government funding was largely due to having no other options. Having formed the idea for a free arts event for the public over a number of years, it was when Handley did the coastal walk from Tamarama to Bondi that the vision came into focus fully. Handley approached Waverly Council for support for the idea and was able to get in-principle support within 48 hours. Handley says that one of biggest errors of judgment that he made at the beginning was assuming that the event would attract government funding easily. This has not been the case. The event has mostly gotten by on corporate and philanthropic funding.

In 1998 Sculpture by the Sea was engaged to participate in the Olympic Arts Festival, which saw the festival expand to a number of other locations across Australia. This brought in funding for the extra arms of the festival yet the event in Sydney has since then remained largely unfunded. Handley says that although the event has been a popular attraction since its inception, he was not even able to get a meeting with the

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Australia Council for the first six years the event was held. He says that one of the key challenges they have faced in gaining government funding has been the misconception that they are a wealthy organisation. This view might have something to do with the scale of the works in the show but that is a misconception because the artists bear most of the costs. Sculpture by the Sea has been committed since it began to getting as much funding for the artists exhibited in the event. This financial commitment has been difficult and only two years ago for the first time each artist in the show was provided with a minimum of \$2,000 to exhibit at Bondi. At the same time there has been a juggle to provide salaries to the exhibition staff who now number 12 full time and 6 permanent part time.

Almost all of the organisation's income is from corporate sponsorship, private donations and commission on sales while the majority of the income the exhibiting artists receive is from sales. In-kind support has also been a key part of the organisation's survival mechanism, and Handley mentions that in-kind legal advice, telecommunications and overnight security has been especially useful.

What the panel all agreed on was that, while their organisations incurred significant costs in their day to day operations, it is the artists they engage that incur the most costs. Making visual art, or in the case of the performing arts, finding time to develop professionally for little to no payment, is extremely time consuming and costly. The general consensus is that if artists are able to make a decent living without government support, then the organisations that promote and exhibit them will be able to attract more significant income on their own as well.

by: Hugh Nichols