

'A revolution in the gallery: from the Arts Council to the artist' (originally published in *Sculpture in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Britain*, Henry Moore Institute, 2003).

Claire Glossop

By the early 1970s the Arts Council had developed two core models for the support and presentation of the contemporary visual arts in Britain. First, its own exhibitions established temporary exhibiting as the curatorial currency for contemporary visual arts. Second, it developed the network of regional galleries that was to become the backbone of the infrastructure and to define visual arts patronage in the late twentieth century. These models had been developed for two-dimensional artworks and that presented particular problems for sculptors. However, by the end of the century artists had changed the gallery and the exhibition beyond recognition. In a direct challenge to the Arts Council's gallery network, artists created new models for gallery exhibition, such as commissioning and site-specific installation, that have revolutionised curatorial discourse within even the largest institutions such as Tate Modern and Baltic.

### *The Arts Council's Gallery Network*

When the Arts Council was founded in 1946 it decided not to fund the existing network of collections-based galleries and museums but rather to establish an alternative infrastructure based on temporary exhibitions. Initially this took the form of providing touring exhibitions. Later this transformed into support for a different group of venues: the *kunsthallen* or exhibition galleries. The initial policy decision not to assume responsibility for funding the collections-based infrastructure was largely expedient. Local authorities had been providing revenue funding for collection-based art galleries since the nineteenth century, often within library complexes, due to a belief in the civilising and educative potential of visual arts. The Arts Council's statutory responsibilities included the stimulation of patronage by other bodies, and therefore it preferred to add value to local

authority investment in the buildings and staff by providing a programme of touring exhibitions using these spaces.<sup>i</sup>

With a dramatic increase in funding and a new policy emphasis on the living artist<sup>ii</sup>, the Arts Council created a group of funded galleries including the Whitechapel Art Gallery, ICA, Arnolfini, Ikon Gallery, MoMA Oxford, the Midland Group, the Penwith Society and Kettle's Yard Gallery during the late 1960s. Through conditions attached to its funding, the Arts Council shaped these galleries into a network, each generating their own exhibitions, but also touring to the other galleries. According to Alan Bowness, a leading member of the Arts Council's advisory Art Panel, the vision for the gallery network was modelled on Whitechapel Art Gallery, which at this time was showing contemporary British artists within a programme of innovative foreign art.<sup>iii</sup> By the early 1970s the Arts Council had added two new London venues to this infrastructure, the Hayward and Serpentine Galleries, both of which it was to administer directly until 1986. The Hayward Gallery was purpose built for international touring exhibitions of Modernist and historic art, in partnership with the London County Council. The Serpentine Gallery was opened in a former tea pavilion in Hyde Park to provide a programme of contemporary group exhibitions, providing a platform for younger artists to have their first exhibition in London.

By the 1970s many artists had become dissatisfied with exhibition as a platform for their work. The development of post-object sculptural practices further exacerbated this problem.<sup>iv</sup> Artists such as Barry Flanagan, Richard Long, Bruce McLean and Stephen Willats were creating sculpture which involved complex installation, time-based elements and interaction with the viewer. Often these works were created specifically for a particular space or place, or in response to a particular opportunity to show them. As the catalogues of exhibitions from this period demonstrate, the programmes of publicly-funded galleries

in the late 1960s and early 1970s reflect a very partial view of the types of sculpture being made with programmes at venues such as the Serpentine being dominated by a more object centred form of sculpture. It was in this context in the mid to late 1970s that a new generation of galleries emerged providing opportunities for artists who were not necessarily producing objects for display.

### *Artist-led spaces of the 1970s and early 1980s*

Writing about his project *Radical Attitudes Towards the Gallery*, a group exhibition held at Art Net Gallery, London in 1977, Tony Rickaby claimed that ‘the role of the gallery has been a major concern of much recent art’.<sup>v</sup> Rickaby asked artists and arts professionals to respond to the question of what ‘should be the attitude of the politically committed artist to “the gallery”’ in no more than 500 words. Surveying his respondents, Rickaby concluded there were three broad ‘solutions’:

1. Reject galleries and use other formats such as film, video, books, murals, magazines, performance, the land, etc.
2. Start alternative galleries, either on existing models (but aimed at different audiences and run by different people) or a completely new model.
3. Use existing galleries but change the type of work shown in them (make it more radical, accessible, etc.).<sup>vi</sup>

During the 1970s, a number of artists and artists’ organisations pursued Rickaby’s second option: starting new galleries. Some, like AIR (Artists’ Information Registry) Gallery which was run by Arts Services Grants Ltd 1975-1989, were largely based on existing models, changing the range of artists they profiled rather than the model itself. Others, such as Acme Gallery and Matt’s Gallery offered artists a radically different model

of operating which was to be profoundly influential on the later generation of galleries (such as Cafe Gallery, Chisenhale Gallery, The Showroom, Milch, BANK), which underpinned London's gallery infrastructure in the later 1980s and 1990s. For example, AIR showed around 200 artists in its first two years providing an alternative platform for exhibiting. By contrast, the emphasis at Matt's was on a qualitative approach and the aim was 'not to increase the visibility of the work, but to create a space for the experience of art'.<sup>vii</sup>

Sandy Nairne's article 'The Institutionalisation of Dissent' on the development of alternative spaces by women and black artists in the USA, makes brief reference to the British scene.<sup>viii</sup> Nairne characterises two features of experimental galleries in the late sixties, 'the making of new and complex works of art and of new forms of interaction with an audience' which resulted in new models taking the form of the laboratory or the studio.<sup>ix</sup> British examples of the laboratory model, cited by Nairne, include the short-lived Arts Lab in Drury Lane and the ICA. Matt's Gallery and Acme Gallery are the other key examples of this new model of exhibition.

### *Acme Gallery*

Acme Studios Housing Association was founded in 1972 to provide residential and work space for a small group of young artists in London. Acme's role in supporting artists through provision of work and living space is the subject of unpublished research by Alison Raftery and an article by Michael Archer.<sup>x</sup> In 2000 Acme began its own wider and ongoing research into artists in East London 1960-2000, but the role of the gallery space it ran 1976-81 from Shelton Street in Covent Garden requires particular mention in the history of the gallery infrastructure in Britain.

Directed by Jonathan Harvey, the Acme Gallery provided an important forum for large-scale sculpture, installation and performance work at a time when few other galleries were showing this kind of work. The gallery programme was eclectic, ranging from a painter such as John Bellany through to the pyrotechnic sculptor Stephen Cripps.<sup>xi</sup> Seeking to offer an ‘alternative’ to the programmes of the larger public and commercial spaces, the gallery policy was to exhibit a wide range of practice – performance, video, experimental film work and installation. However by virtue of its willingness to accommodate practice which had so few other outlets, the gallery became particularly associated with these areas, for example hosting the ‘Live Work’ element of *New Contemporaries* in 1976 and 1977. The Gallery also developed particular relationships with certain artists showing their work repeatedly, for example Stuart Brisley and Ron Haselden (**figure 1**). Artists were selected for a programme of mainly solo exhibitions on the basis of their ability to take on what was usually the biggest challenge of their career to date.

A 1977 Acme gallery brochure outlines an exhibition policy that sought to create opportunities which were responsive to the needs of artists:

Accepting the limitations of the building itself, we see the space as being entirely flexible. We want artists to feel that the gallery is here for them to use and alter to suit their own requirements, not only in terms of the space, but also in the broader sense of how exhibitions are presented and publicised. In this way we hope that artists will be directly involved in the dialogue of what a gallery can and should be.<sup>xii</sup>

The ‘limitations of the building itself’ could also be challenged, as architectural modifications by artists such as Darrell Viner, Kerry Trengrove and Stuart Brisley highlighted. The two gallery spaces (one upstairs, one downstairs) had, by the time the

gallery closed in 1981, been thoroughly modified, undermined and occupied in spectacular ways and artists making new work for the space became increasingly engaged in an ongoing dialogue with a space that had a history of particular installations and events.

Kerry Trengrove's 'An Eight Day Passage' (1977) (**figure 2**) involved the artist being walled up inside a brick structure in the lower gallery and then digging his way out to escape into the basement. For the duration of the performance the artist was walled inside the gallery which was open 24 hours a day to visitors who could see and talk to him via a video link to the upper gallery space. Visitors talked to the artist about the experience, his progress and his ideas, prompted by a sound installation in the upper gallery with political prisoners recounting their stories providing a political context for the performance. Considerable public interest was created, not least when the District Surveyor became concerned about the legal status of the construction and building work, a situation which was resolved with advice from art lawyer Henry Lydiate.<sup>xiii</sup>

Darrell Viner's 'Who Manipulates Who' (1981) (**figures 3 & 4**) was a kinetic sculpture which extended through the upper gallery into the lower space. On entering the lower gallery the visitor saw a suspended platform pitching and listing erratically and apparently without cause. On reaching the upper gallery the mechanics were revealed: a large beam-structure with its four legs resting on motors was rotating at different speeds causing the threatening and unpredictable sudden movements.

Acme Gallery closed in 1981 when its lease expired, having served its purpose with other galleries beginning to show more experimental work. Acme continues as a provider of studios and has also provided premises for a number of other galleries including Interim Art (established in 1984 by Maureen Paley, originally at Beck Road), The Showroom

(opened 1983 as a lettable exhibition space and later, in 1988, let to David Thorp to run as a public gallery), and Matt's Gallery (since 1992).

### *Matt's Gallery*

The exhibition guide to *Backspace* – an exhibition marking the twentieth anniversary of Matt's Gallery – outlines the origins and objectives of this unique institution. Founded, and still led, by Robin Klassnik, Matt's Gallery opened in 1979. Originally Klassnik's own studio space in Martello Street (in a studio complex managed by SPACE, part of the umbrella organization Art Services Ltd which also ran the AIR Gallery) was used as a location for other artists to make and present new work. Matt's Gallery moved in 1992 to its current location in Copperfield Road where it continues 'to provide artists with the space and time to develop new ideas and possibly new ways of working while making a new work for the space'.<sup>xiv</sup> This approach, Klassnik believes, is the most effective way to support artists in showing their work, adding that timing is a key consideration 'to allow for the fine tuning for which there is often not enough time at other galleries'.<sup>xv</sup> Matt's Gallery often works with younger and less-established artists but also 'established artists who find the need for an open approach that they cannot find elsewhere'.<sup>xvi</sup>

As an artist, Klassnik had worked with the Polish artist Jaroslaw Kozlowski at his Galerie Akumulatory 2 in 1975 and cites this example as a model for the approach developed at Matt's. Akumulatory 2 converted a students' union building in Poznan into a exhibition space for exhibitions of international artists which ran for only a few days, attracting a dedicated audience of peers. It was this focus on engaged communication that appears to have particularly impressed Klassnik.<sup>xvii</sup>

Richard Wilson's exhibitions at Matt's Gallery, such as '20:50' (1987) and 'She Came in Through the Bathroom Window' (1989) (**figure 5**) are recognised as canonical works

within the history of sculpture and installation. Requiring considerable architectural modifications to the building, these works reveal the lengths to which the gallery is prepared to go to accommodate artists' ideas and works. For 'She Came in Through the Bathroom Window' the industrial-size windows stretching the length of the gallery's exterior wall were taken out and reconstructed at a different angle, jutting into the gallery space.

### *New gallery models*

Acme Gallery and Matt's, through focusing above all else on the requirements of the artist, were able to support an extraordinary range of ambitious projects which have been pivotal within individual artists' artistic and professional development. These galleries have equally had significant impact on the models of curating practiced throughout the wider gallery infrastructure. An emphasis on solo exhibitions and relationships between artists and the gallery over a period of time characterise both spaces. Also striking is the prevalence of process-based work, whether Kerry Trengrove's work at Acme or Susan Hiller's 'Work in Progress' (1980) and more recently Hayley Newman's 'The Daily Hayley' (2001) at Matt's, which offer the viewer an opportunity to observe and even engage with the artist during the realisation of the work.

### *Outside the gallery*

Curatorial developments outside the gallery, including organisations such as Artangel and Locus+ as well as one-off initiatives such as artranspennine98, have equally built on this legacy of artist-centred production. After Acme Gallery closed in 1981 Jonathan Harvey became involved with the TWSA 3D<sup>xviii</sup> project, along with James Lingwood (who has been Co-Director of Artangel from 1992), which in some ways can be seen as a precursor to the temporary public commissioning that was to become an important aspect of sculptural practice in the 1990s. Artangel enables artists to produce ambitious works

which engage with sites and audiences in new and challenging ways, for example, for Michael Landy's 'Breakdown' (2001) the artist and a team of assistants disassembled all his possessions on a inverted production-line installed in the former C&A Oxford Street flagship store.<sup>xix</sup> Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993-94) is perhaps Artangel's most celebrated project. A temporary public sculpture created through casting the internal space of a Victorian terraced house on Grove Road in East London, *House* typifies Artangel's approach to commissioning at its most successful. Attracting many tens of thousands of visitors during its short life, and stimulating debate within the press about sculpture and social issues (such as regeneration and homelessness), the sculpture also offered the young artist an unparalleled opportunity to develop her practice and her profile.

#### *2000: the new art factories*

Tate Modern opened in May 2000, Baltic a year later. These two institutions comprise the latest additions to the gallery infrastructure in Britain.

The impact of the artist-led commissioning practice is evident not only in Tate's collections (for example, Cornelia Parker's 'Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View' (1991), an installation created through blowing up a shed with the aid of the Army, originally created for Chisenhale Gallery), its exhibitions (with artist-led spaces featuring in the London section of the exhibition *Century City* in 2001) but most importantly in its programme of commissions in the Turbine Hall. This programme of commissioning work specifically for the space has its origins in the new approaches to working with artists developed in venues such as Matt's and Acme during the 1970s and early 1980s, and later at spaces such as The Showroom, Cafe Gallery and Chisenhale.

At Baltic this curatorial tendency finds its most recent and highly developed outlet through the replacement of the gallery with an 'Arts Factory' model.<sup>xx</sup> These large

institutions may not be able to offer the same degree of experimental opportunity to artists as smaller spaces but – as was witnessed during the installation of Anish Kapoor’s ‘Marsyas’ at Tate Modern in 2002 (**figure 6**), and from the viewing platform above one of the main exhibition galleries at Baltic (from where visitors can see into the main gallery during installation) – they can offer new ways into experiencing sculpture for visitors, opening up the processes of production and installation.

### *Areas for further research*

The ongoing impact on artists and audiences of the Arts Council’s policy for the visual arts infrastructure demands further study, however the importance of artist-centred galleries such as Matt’s Gallery and Acme Gallery in developing exhibition practice is clear.<sup>xxi</sup> Acme Gallery no longer exists and there is little published information available regarding the gallery infrastructure in the 1970s and 1980s although Acme’s research programme and website is beginning to address this need.<sup>xxii</sup> Archive materials, although not catalogued or conserved in any systematic way, do exist and interviews with key individuals have informed this writing.<sup>xxiii</sup> Considering the important role these galleries played in how artists and curators work today, the lack of research and publishing in this area, and the need to preserve and study the archives of these organisations, stands out as a pressing priority for the future study of sculpture at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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### NOTES

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<sup>i</sup>The Arts Council's position on the funding of local authority galleries is discussed in the Arts Council of Great Britain, Annual Report and Audited Accounts, (London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1954/55), .10-11. The following year's Annual Report relays communication between the Chair of the Arts Council (Kenneth Clark) and the Board of Education (the Government Ministry which funded the Arts Council at this point) for clarification of its responsibilities for art collections. It was determined that the Museums Association retained responsibility for art collections and art museums.

<sup>ii</sup>The prioritisation of the living artist was a central theme of the Government's first arts policy; Her Majesty's Government, A Policy for the Arts: the Arts; the First Steps, Cmnd. 4676, London, HMSO, 1965.

<sup>iii</sup>It should be noted, however, that a number of regional galleries (particularly York, Wakefield and Leeds) developed their own exceptional programmes of sculpture during the 1940s and 1950s, as detailed in Richard Calvocoressi, 'Public Sculpture in the 1950s', in Nicholas Serota and Sandy Nairne, eds., British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century, (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery exhibition catalogue, 1981), .135-154.

<sup>iv</sup>'Post object art' is one of the many terms used to embrace the diverse manifestations of conceptual, installation, performative and non-Formalist practice in which the process of making the work is more important than any object finally produced. It entered mainstream usage following its employment in Donald Karshan's essay 'The Seventies: post-object art' written for the exhibition *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* held at the New York Cultural Center in 1970 and published as an article in *Studio International* (Donald Karshan, 'The seventies: post-object art', Studio International, vol.180, no.925, (September 1970), pp.69-70.) As a term, it is particularly relevant to discussions of sculpture as it neatly conveys the distinction between these divergent and expansive practices of post object artists and the essentialism of the Formalist object sculptors.

<sup>v</sup>Tony Rickaby, 'Radical Attitudes Towards the Gallery', in, Cork, Richard, ed., Studio International, special issue, 'Art Galleries and Alternative Spaces', vol.195, no.990, (1980), p.20.

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<sup>vi</sup>Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup>Robin Klassnik, 'The Galleries Talk', Flash Art News, No.1, 1987.

<sup>viii</sup>Sandy Nairne, 'The institutionalization of dissent', in, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, eds., Thinking about Exhibitions, (London: Routledge, 1996)., pp.387-410.

<sup>ix</sup>Ibid, p.391.

<sup>x</sup>Raftery, Alison, Surviving the Decade. The alternative in context. The fate of the alternative visual arts organisation in the Thatcher decade, unpublished MA thesis, City University, London, 1994; Michael Archer, 'Oranges and Lemons, Oranges and Bananas, in Artists in East London (1960-2000), research project bulletin, (London: Acme, 2001); and [www.artistsineastlondon.org](http://www.artistsineastlondon.org)

<sup>xi</sup> For further details see Jonathan Harvey, ed., Stephen Cripps: pyrotechnic sculptor, (London: Acme and Stephen Cripps Trust, 1992).

<sup>xii</sup>Acme, The Acme Gallery, brochure, (London: Acme Housing Association Ltd, 1977).

<sup>xiii</sup>Henry Lydiate, 'Self Expression and the Law', *Art Monthly*, issue 13, 1977, p.34. The collected published 'Art Law' series of articles is available at [www.artquest.org.uk/artlaw](http://www.artquest.org.uk/artlaw)

<sup>xiv</sup>Matt's Gallery, *Backspace*, exhibition guide, (London: Matt's Gallery, 1999).

<sup>xv</sup>Ibid.

<sup>xvi</sup>Ibid.

<sup>xvii</sup>'[The audience] came there because they wanted to see a piece of work, come and meet the artist, come and have some form of communication and discuss things', Robin Klassnik interview with Alison Raftery, cited in Raftery, *op. cit.*, p.60.

<sup>xviii</sup>Television South West developed arts programming and projects in the early 1980s including the Four Cities Project and TWSA 3D which involved siting sculpture in public spaces. See, Deanna Petherbridge, 'Conference: Making Space - Art Projects Beyond the Gallery', Art Monthly, no. 115, April 1988, pp.27-29 and James Lingwood, ed., TSWA Four Cities Project: New Works for Different Places, (Bristol: TSWA, 1990).

<sup>xix</sup>A catalogue of Artangel's projects to the current day is available at [www.artangel.org.uk](http://www.artangel.org.uk)

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<sup>xx</sup>Nordgren, Sune, and Martin, Sarah, eds., New Sites - New Art, first BALTIC international seminar, (Newcastle: University of Newcastle and BALTIC, 2000), p.9.

<sup>xxi</sup>The development of the Arts Council's exhibition policy and its impact for artists and audiences is addressed at length in Claire Glossop, Exhibition and the reception and practice of sculpture in Britain 1945-2000, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2001. This research focusses mainly on the role of the Arts Council and the major galleries because information regarding the smaller galleries, and particularly those such as AIR, Arts Lab and Acme which no longer exist, was very difficult to locate and access.

<sup>xxii</sup>AIR Gallery archives are held by Art Services Grants Ltd and the organisation has plans to make these accessible in its new Triangle building in Hackney, although the collection is not catalogued. Matt's Gallery has its own archive comprising installation photography and materials relating to the programme. Neither organisation employs an archivist or have the resources to provide public access to their collections. Acme have begun a research project into artists in East London, material from which is available publicly online at [www.artistsineastlondon.org](http://www.artistsineastlondon.org)

<sup>xxiii</sup>I would particularly like to acknowledge the valuable advice of Alison Raftery whose MPhil is an important source of information on this subject and Sir Alan Bowness, the late Joanna Drew, Jonathan Harvey and Robin Klassnik who were interviewed as part of my research.

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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### Figure 1

Ron Haselden

‘Working 12 Days at The Acme Gallery’, 1978

Installation view, The Acme Gallery, London.

### Figure 2

Kerry Trengrove

‘An Eight Day Passage’, 1977

Performance view, The Acme Gallery, London

### Figure 3

Darrell Viner

‘Who Manipulates Who’, 1981

Installation view, upper gallery, The Acme Gallery, London.

### Figure 4

Darrell Viner

‘Who Manipulates Who’, 1981

Installation view, lower gallery, The Acme Gallery, London.

### Figure 5

Richard Wilson

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'She Came in Through the Bathroom Window, 1989

Matt's Gallery, Martello Street, London

Figure 6

Anish Kapoor

'Marsyas', 2002

Installation view, Turbine Hall, Unilever Commission Series, Tate Modern, London