

## **Artist-Run Initiatives**

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## ***Artist-Run Initiatives: Locating History in the Present***

**Scottish Society for Art History**

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Scotland has a long tradition of Artist-Run Initiatives – ARIs – that have invariably been instigated by a critique of the established art institutions, and motivated by a pragmatic need to create opportunities in order to sustain artistic practice. They've proved essential in developing artistic practice, whilst negotiating the institutional, economic and structural obstacles that were historically perceived as barriers to creative and professional development.

The term ARI encompasses a myriad of activities that exist alongside commercial galleries, public museums, and established institutions. Despite their variation ARIs can be typified by a mutual interest in self-determination and the capacity to develop and transform at a greater pace than their established counterparts. Their alacrity means that ARIs are involved in *producing* art scenes, whereas established institutions represent those that already exist. Another key distinction between ARIs and established institutions is underlined by the designation 'Artist-Run'. They are developed and managed by artists, rather than administrators, and the artist-driven governance model of ARIs means that the committee are responsible for all aspects of the gallery. In contrast established institutions, such as the National Galleries of Scotland, are broadly characterized by strong hierarchical relations, with chains of command that delineate responsibilities within the organisation. ARIs aim to overturn the concept of centrally driven, top-down delivery by replacing it with horizontal distributions of knowledge and practice via their self-organization.

Historically, the visibility of ARIs, both in the art world and to the general public, has always been negligible. One reason for this is that ARIs can often be considered as exclusive cliques, which exclude those who are not part of their peer-group membership. The lack of consideration given to ARIs can also be attributed to the dominance of established institutions that have a much more highly visible role and exert considerable impact as custodians of culture. Another reason is the inherent dispersed ownership of ARIs through their successive committees. Generally, ARIs have a rolling committee, usually between five and seven members who work on a voluntary basis and are responsible for all aspects of the gallery. This model is beneficial in that it ensures a built-in ability for the gallery to regenerate every few years, with periodic changes in personnel there is a constant turnover of new influences. The transitory nature of the committee does however have its disadvantages in that this often means that the associated knowledge and documentation is particularly vulnerable to being lost, or exists only in the minds of those who experience it.

This is reflected in the standard history of artist-run practice in Scotland. This habitually repeated account is almost exclusively posited around Transmission – which was

established 1983 – and it’s a history that neglects to acknowledge the extent to which the 1950s, 60s and 70s precursors provided vital precedents by testing strategies redolent of those deployed in contemporary ARIs.

Unquestionably, it is important to acknowledge the artistic, social, economic and political impact that Transmission has had in shaping the Scottish contemporary art world, particularly in light of the latest decision by Creative Scotland to drop Transmission from its portfolio of regularly funded organizations. This paper certainly doesn’t intend to deny Transmission or indeed Glasgow their place in the history of ARIs, rather the intention is to recognise that many ARIs have slipped below the radar of artist-led history in Scotland. The aim is to redresses the historical imbalance by acknowledging the role that the first wave ARIs played in scoping out an alternative to the established ideological models and the prevailing structures and discourses of the art world. Through a discussion of Edinburgh’s 57 Gallery (est. 1957), this talk will demonstrate how the establishment of this pioneering ARI was a result of action taken by artists in the city to gain exposure and to control the conditions and meanings of their activities. And in doing so it will show that the practices, theories and debates around contemporary ARIs are informed, shaped and made possible by this first wave of ARIs.

The 57 Gallery was the first in a succession of key ARIs in Scotland, which were initiated by artists who were intent on transforming the hegemonic cultural value systems of the established institutions. In other words, artists were challenging the gatekeepers – the arbiters of taste – those who make the decisions about what included/excluded in our cultural institutions and therefore our cultural narratives. This first-wave of ARIs included, amongst others, the 57 Gallery, Edinburgh (est. 1957), the New 57 Gallery, Edinburgh (est. 1966), the Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh (est. 1966), Glasgow League of Artists, Glasgow (est. 1971), Third Eye Centre, Glasgow (est. 1975), Forebank/Seagate, Dundee (est. 1976), and the 369 Gallery, Edinburgh (est. 1978).

The founding of the 57 Gallery was part of a consensus among artists for the need to collectively form their own organisations, which was provoked by the fact that they were being rejected and neglected by established institutions, such as Edinburgh’s Royal Scottish Academy (RSA).

At the time of the 57 Gallery’s inception the critic Cordelia Oliver wrote that “the climate was unbelievably bleak for any talented non-conformist in their first few years out of art school” (Oliver, C.1969, p. 2) as there was virtually no opportunities for young artists to show their work. Furthermore, the Edinburgh International Festival (est. 1947) also overlooked home-grown contemporary talents preferring to foreground 19th century French painting with a succession of annual exhibitions including: Degas (1952), Renoir (1953), Cezanne (1954), Gauguin (1955), Braque (1956) and Monet (1957).

In response the 57 Gallery was founded on the premise that it would be an independent space where artists could actively participate in the administration and policy forming of the gallery (Oliver, C. 1969). To support the idea an association was formed of subscribing members and a committee was elected to run the gallery. This model of ARI governance, of an unpaid committee of practicing artists and an egalitarian membership, has become the

structural blueprint of contemporary artist-run galleries, and whilst it is routinely attributed to Transmission it's more accurately indebted to the 57 Gallery.

The formation of the 57 Gallery was indicative of the broader concerns by artists at the time that were increasingly directed towards a critique and transformation of the established institutions of art. From the mid 1960s artists across Europe and the USA were engaging in institutional critique. They challenged the conventions of power which bound them to dealers, curators, critics and collectors and they sought to participate directly in the advocacy, presentation, interpretation and criticism of their own work. Through self-organisation artists began dismantling the belief that the academies were the sole arbitrators of aesthetic standards, which began to disintegrate ideas and attitudes around the monopolistic authority of the established institutions.

For example, the artist Sandy Moffat (who was later to be on the committee of the 57 Gallery in it's subsequent incarnation as the New 57 Gallery) and John Bellany – who'd both studied Painting at Edinburgh College of Art – were involved in interventions against what they perceived as the conservatism of the Royal Scottish Academy (the RSA). The RSA was at that time seen as the inaccessible pinnacle of artistic reputation in Scotland. Fuelled by the lack of Scottish representation at the official Edinburgh International Festival Moffat and Bellany held exhibitions of their paintings on the railings of the RSA during the 1963, '64 and '65 festivals. Their open air exhibitions were accompanied by issues of the publication *Rocket*, written by the poet and proselytiser Alan Bold. Bold outlined in *Rocket* that Moffat and Bellany had been motivated to mount their exhibitions by the "self-seeking insularity of the Selection Committee of the R.S.A" and that they "would not submit work for the R.S.A. because they could not accept it as a competent authority or as a useful institution" (Bold, A. 1964, p. 2). In a strategic way Moffat and Bellany were attempting to demonstrate the capacity for change and in doing so implied that cultural power was not exclusive to the established institutions.

Underlining Moffat and Bellany's Open Air Exhibitions and the 57 Gallery were issues concerned with the power relations within society and a critique of the cultural hegemony as perpetuated through the established cultural institutions.

By 1966, when the New 57 Gallery opened, it was against the backdrop of growing political activism and the incoming committee of the New 57 Gallery was composed of a group of artists who were engaged in institutional critique and social activism.

The New 57 Gallery's revised constitution stressed their position as a pedagogical hub. This reflected the widespread discontentment with the forms of the transmission of knowledge that had taken hold across Europe through the 1960s. In particular, this chimed with the dissatisfaction amongst students with the content of teaching and with the inequitable relations between teacher and student. This led to students across Europe challenging the status quo with pro-situ happenings that attacked expertise and notably reached its peak in May 1968 with the Paris student uprising when 30,000 students clashed with police. These events profoundly and irrevocably changed social attitudes and resulted in a newfound scepticism of hierarchical structures of power. The events of 1968, compounded by the expansion in art school provision in the UK during the 1960s, resulted in artists questioning

not only their position in society but also their possible means of making a living. This had a profound effect on artist-run culture. As a direct result, the Scottish art scene began to benefit from the input of younger artists who were politically motivated and this was manifest in their self-organised activities. Moffat, who joined the committee of the New 57 Gallery in 1968 wrote that the role of the Gallery was “To present a radical alternative in Scotland to the established galleries and institutions” (Moffat, A. 1973, p. 9). Moffat’s use of the term radical is significant in relation to how he describes the 57 Gallery’s structure and programming. It suggested that its focus was on transforming the cultural value systems of established institutions via revolutionary means.

What was important about the (New) 57 Gallery was that the impetus came from the grassroots; artists identified what was required in the particular Scottish situation at that time and responded with their self-initiated project. They established the blueprint for a model that was systematically organised and maintained by successive groups of artists. The (New) 57 Gallery advanced an intellectual curiosity that is more difficult to achieve in organisations with sanctioned roles and responsibilities. In the period of their self-regulating capacity they were able to maintain relative sovereignty from politically led administrations. They generated their own projects that were ingrained in the Scottish locale whilst simultaneously extending their reach towards connecting with the international art world.

Through its self-governance the (New) 57 Gallery was orientated towards strategies of change and possessed a decisive critical ideal that asserted that it was no longer sufficient to duplicate existing frameworks where the relationship between artist and gallery is regulated or delineated. In this sense the (New) 57 Gallery had an important role in challenging the conventional assumption that the direction and development in the Scottish art world was towards centralisation, hierarchy and the domination of established institutions.

Whilst 1960s critique may no longer be effective, ARIs in Scotland from that period have left a lasting legacy by shaping Scottish contemporary art practice. Elements of the first wave of self-organised practice from the 1950s-70s can be seen to repeat themselves in contemporary scenes. This is evident in contemporary ARIs that opt for an organisational structure, which is democratic and collective rather than hierarchical, who share a belief in self-help and mutual aid to get things done, and who overcome passivity through their own DIY strategies, rather than depending on experts or established authority.

The identity and role of ARIs has changed as expectations and practices have shifted. The focus could now be said to have shifted toward more sophisticated art world manoeuvres rather than being politically and ideologically based, which may indicate a retraction of 1960s radicalism. Whilst this suggests that the once-radical aspirations of artist-run activities have given way to a more individualistic and entrepreneurial spirit, the situation is far more complex and contradictory. Rather than surrendering the critical territory that their predecessors fought for, members of contemporary ARIs are often either unaware of the genealogy of ARIs or are consciously distancing themselves from the preceding generation. Whilst the contemporary successors may not be viewed as overt political and social dissidents, they do retain an air of the anti-establishment attitude that motivated their predecessors. On the whole contemporary ARIs are not trying to model themselves as

radical alternatives yet they do pursue the route of discarding established conventions and attempting new solutions. In short, they remain an alternative to the established institutions in the production and display of art.

Returning to where I began, to the the egregious withdrawal of funding from Transmission by Creative Scotland, this is a resurfacing of cultural rationing that serves to validate once more the lack of confidence felt towards established institutions.

It also seems to suggest that ARIs continue to be undervalued and overexploited by funding bodies as well as established institutions and governments. Whilst it's fair to say that this is evidence of the transference of power from artists to institutions, from ARIs to the establishment we should also be mindful not to overestimate the power of institutions or play down the agency of ARIs.