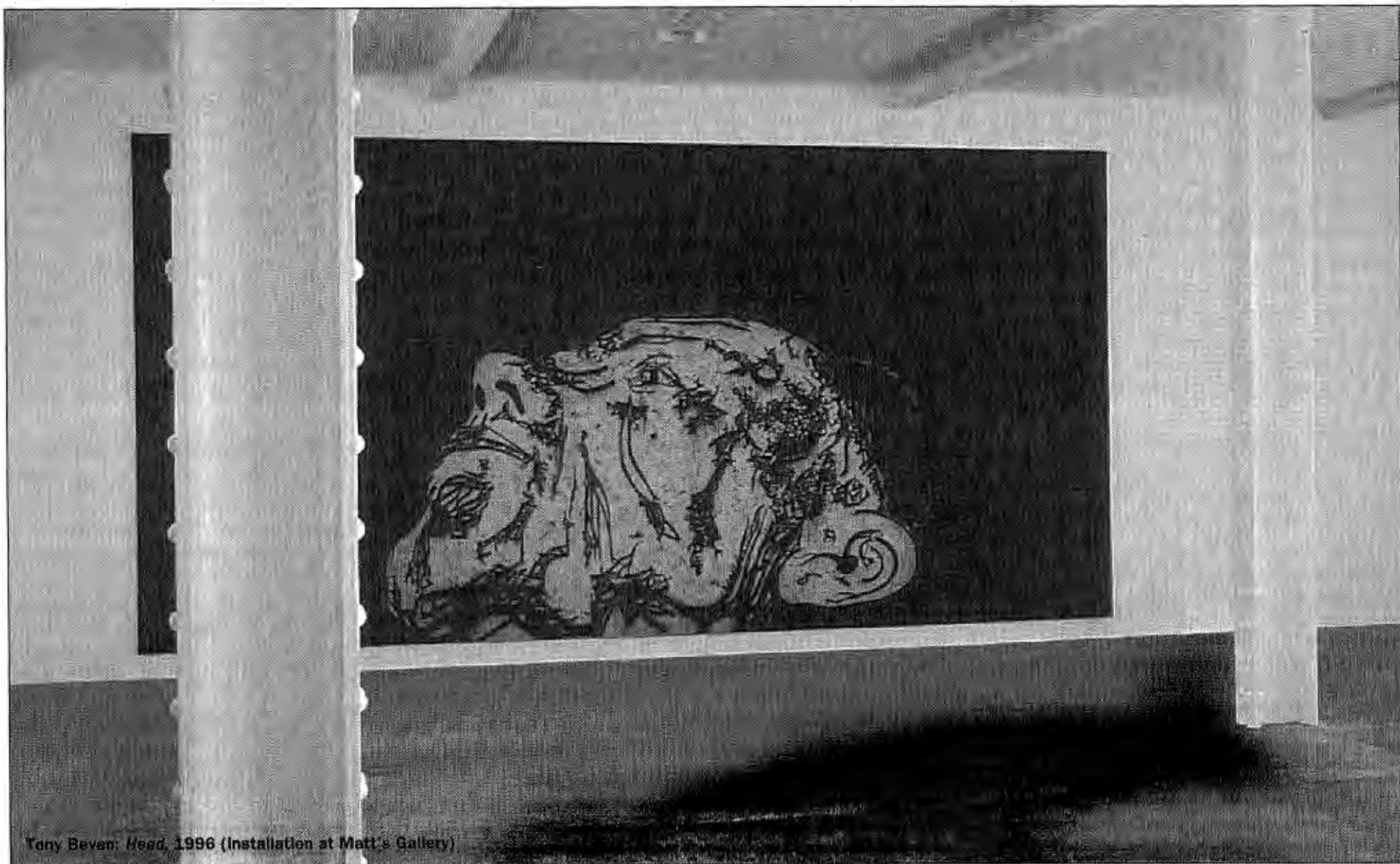


# UNTITLED

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## THATCHER'S CHILDREN



Tony Bevan: *Head*, 1996 (Installation at Matt's Gallery)

JOHN RIDDY

# On your bike!

## LONDON'S ARTIST-RUN SPACES

Mark Harris

**I**N THE LAST FEW YEARS, artist-run spaces and events have been the measure of what is interesting in London in the visual arts. These initiatives received an official accolade from the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris with the publication of a directory of such spaces to accompany *life/live*, an overview of new British art which finished last January and is now in Portugal. The London Arts Board, which has given financial support to such spaces, has been sponsoring Sue Jones' more complete study of the phenomenon which will be published later this year. With this kind of well-researched documentation originating beyond the spaces themselves, has the movement become sufficiently established for outsiders to discern patterns of behaviour that start to congeal into a history? Are the artist-run spaces slowing down to catch financial support now that Lottery funding is more accessible, or are they driven enough to remain vital?

It would be hard to imagine a more moribund commercial art sector than that of London right now. The few interesting recent shows have been organised by independent curators or have mimicked the appearance of livelier artist-spaces, as happened with the summer shows at the Lisson Gallery, the video blitz at Anthony D'Offay and group shows at Richard Salmon. A dearth of imagination in the commercial sector spreads into the programming of the publicly funded spaces, which have also been vulnerable to the downmarket aesthetic of fringe galleries. The ICA's *Belladonna*, for example,

derived its installation method from the cavalier incoherence of some artists' low-budget events.

What might have been an opportunity for the Hayward's new exhibition, *Material Culture*, to test the limits of the idiomatic inventiveness seen in some of these artist-spaces looks instead like an excuse to round up much of their favourite crowd under the well-used concept of the object. Oxford's MOMA exhibition of new British painting, *Absolute Vision*, was a lazy collection of the long-familiar where the limitation of painting to what is flat and painted took us back to the prejudices of twenty years ago. The Tate's project room at last addresses a gap in that institution's responsibility to contemporary art, but the focus on individual artists, the lack of an international perspective, the tendency towards order and explication are all shortcomings. Never more than now have young artists needed self-generated exhibitions, and if new funding enables them to "cross-over" into respectability, it may prove counter-productive.

You hear often that a lack of commercial interest drives artists to set up their own exhibitions, but twenty years ago when there was even less commercial activity, it was expected that artists would be content to work for years producing art that had only the slightest chance of being seen. It's only in the last decade that work has been pushed out to find an audience. Many artists will now only make work in response to an actual project, bringing a conceptual resourcefulness to the issues of a particular exhibition. There is less accumulation of a body of

work and more a series of reactions to idiosyncratic proposals and spaces, such as Rear Window's *Care and Control* at Hackney Hospital in 1995. It is also obvious that these free-form installation methods break down the distinction between gallery environment and individual artwork. Exhibitions become a Bakhtinian carnival, like Bank's pile ups, Cubitt's installations, the Tannery's intermingled hangings, or Beaconsfield's multi-media events. Perhaps these initiatives grow out of a freedom from the basic demand for commodifiable artwork; certainly only in a more vital market would commercial galleries stretch themselves to accommodate these ideas. It happens with the occasional one-person show, such as Joe Grigely's at D'Offay's, but for the moment British artists can only experiment with this medium of exhibition critique in the freedom of their own spaces.

The sectors are nevertheless interdependent, with represented artists moving back and forth between artist-run and commercial spaces. Tracey Emin still runs her own space while showing with a commercial gallery, and the Chapman brothers, with no shortage of commercial opportunities, recently curated an exhibition of friends' work at Independent Artists Space. Though not directed by artists, IAS funded them to curate their own shows and to produce an accompanying catalogue, in this way positioning itself between the two alternatives. The distinctions continue to blur when gallerist/critic Andrew Renton is invited to put together a show at the Tannery while running his own space, Cleveland, as artists' project room and spill over

from Lotta Hammer's gallery next door. Similarly with artist Martin Maloney whose gallery *Lost in Space* moved to Karsten Schubert's for a month last year where he curated *Die Yuppie Scum*. Some spaces shift steadily towards the commercial sector by representing artists. As the pioneer for artist-run spaces, Matt's Gallery, started in 1979, sets an operational standard that others can't match. Director Robin Klassnik raises funds for production costs and pays artists a fee, still collaborating with the installations although no longer a practising artist himself. The object has always been to provide a sympathetic venue where artists can realise projects no one else will touch, and the relationship has developed into full representation for eleven of them.

Like Klassnik, Paul Hedge of Hales Gallery was once an artist himself and now represents others. The relationship is similarly collaborative, though in Hales' case the artists are also involved in the programming of exhibitions. This move to representation, to a kind of pastoral role for artist-director, seems to evolve naturally as artist and gallery adapt to commercial success. Again, in a more active market like New York, artists would jump to the most promising commercial opportunity.

Most of these spaces don't sell much art, but are run on artists' time and small amounts of public money. By becoming charities, as Conductors' Hallway in Camberwell has done, these ad hoc organisations can become eligible for local government funding and rate rebates which may prolong their life but require a sacrifice of manoeuvrability. Conductors' Hallway is typical of many spaces in being contained and subsidised by an artists' studio building, but as they move into their second year, funding applications have required them to plan twelve months ahead to give the appearance of a coherent programme. Their plan to collaborate with Southwark Council in acquiring a further building and so enable both organisations to apply collectively for lottery funding indicates how ambitious and well organised some of these apparently casual spaces are. Also endowed with charity status, Beaconsfield have renovated their Vauxhall ragged school, leased from Railtrack, to a state that few commercial spaces could aspire to. Committed to raising funds on a project basis, they have the flexibility of staging events as money becomes available; being skilled at fund-raising, like Matt's Gallery, they are in a position to help with fabrication costs and fees. Also in Vauxhall, Gasworks has the benefit of studio support for its rent and a patron whose donation pays for an administrator, relieving the four-artist committee of the more routine work while ensuring a full schedule of exhibitions.

If some artist-run spaces are able to align their future with the intentions of local government or funding bodies, many thrive on a more insecure independence, whether these are one-off artist installations in flats or studios or the work of a group of nomadic artist-curators. In any survey of the field these ventures tend to be overlooked for lack of a stable venue or because of their erratic programming, yet some of the best initiatives have taken place at this level. Amongst many such events last year the German artist Till Exit in Bow Arts studios, Lucy Wood in Lower Marsh, and James White and Tim Steward in Banner Street organised their own unusual installations in vacant spaces.

That many artist-run spaces select their shows from small cliques of supporting artists gives them an important idiosyncrasy but also reduces possibilities for outsiders and definitely provokes other groups of artists to organise their own shows; hanging around for an established alternative space to take an interest in one's work can be as fruitless as seeking attention in the commercial sector. These spaces were set up by tight groups and continue to gain identity in a certain exclusiveness. To some extent they wouldn't be interesting otherwise, since these spaces are visited to see a curatorial profile as much as an artist's work. If some organisations are not worried by the self-interest of artists showing in their own spaces, there are those like Cubitt which feels its integrity depends on barring its forty-strong studio membership from participation in its shows. For many artists though, the massive effort and at times financial outlay involved in running these spaces is only worthwhile if they can provide their own work with a new context, and there is in any case such diversity amongst the spaces that this tendency doesn't affect their interest.

Liam Gillick's criticism four years ago ("Curating for Pleasure and Profit", *Art Monthly*, June 1993) that these shows were often no more than conservative displays of art lacking any enquiry into the meaning of exhibiting is bound to persist in some cases today. Scrape away the enthusiastic adventurism and you are sometimes left with individual pieces of work scattered predictably around a space. Certainly in spite of some interesting pieces this was the case with *The Happy Shopper*, a one-off venture in an old Elephant and Castle Tesco supermarket in December last year. Usually however, the prominence of installation art has alerted object and video makers to consider the environment of the exhibition as crucial to reception of the work. If anything, the problem has shifted too far in the other direction where something of an aesthete's sensitivity to locale has led to predictably self-effacing installations. This happened for example with Space Explorations' venture *High-Rise* in a Euston Road tower block last year, a disappointing surrender to discretion and immediacy.

If Gillick's point can still be made it may not matter that much to artists who are interested in messing up the codes of appropriateness that characterised an earlier period. These temporary spaces are ideal for work that won't be fixed by conventional assignments of meaning. Work that cultivates irreverent abandon is likely to want a disruptive presentation. Some of these spaces like Bank's Dog, the Gallerette and 30 Underwood Street stage periodic events in fixed venues, but many others, including Peter Lewis's Flag Organisation are itinerant, taking over spaces as they become available. Bank sometimes extend their shows out from the gallery with reams of ironic publicity,

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while Adam Dant's Gallerette produces the low-budget comic Donald Parsnips as a wry commentary on art making and the art scene. Addressing the question of quality to these events is misdirected unless it considers the extent that they reassess notions of value and point out the position from which the question is being asked to begin with.

It's likely that these one-off artist-run exhibitions will soon be eligible for some real support. The London Arts Board is ending its pilot scheme which gave money for a series of shows, including, for example, two years of support for Bank. To their credit they are attempting to measure the effects of their funding in the short term and have concluded that sustained support has adversely affected the inventiveness of some exhibition programmes and may be stifling the emergence of new groups of artist-curators. The more established spaces will still be eligible, but from April LAB want to fund individual projects regardless of how ephemeral the organisation might be. Approximately twenty grants ranging from £500-£8000 could help to bring some of these exhibitions in from the margins and contribute to better documentation so that they no longer vanish without trace. LAB may determine their awards according to the extent a project sounds interesting or unusual, but at a time when arts organisations are being rewarded for fiscal responsibility and endurance it is refreshing to think that the opposite qualities might in this case improve an applicant's chances.

Whatever their status, these artist-run spaces have been diverting critical attention away from the commercial sector and from the established non-profits. As outlined earlier, this is partly the fault of the dull programming of the latter spaces but also reveals London's respect for eccentricity, in taking a perverse pleasure in seeing things done the wrong way. There is also interest in these spaces as a re-enfranchisement of the disenfranchised, in artists simply taking back the designates of relevance from institutions. The art "institution" is far more in flux here than in the U.S. where its structures are monolithic and stable, the routes from fringe to prominence fairly predictable. In London by contrast the centre has dissolved, giving way to many outlying nodes of activity that replace a hierarchy with a constellation. This progressive formation of a "weak" centre draws support, audiences, and inevitably ascription of value, into the apparent vacuum. The low-frequency publicity of these spaces, their inwardness, attracts its opposite in the form of critical attention, with the result that artist-run spaces, which at another time or in another place might be dismissed as churlish reactions to commercial failure, instead turn out to redefine what becomes commercially and aesthetically successful.



David Crawforth, Hayley Newman & Panasonic: *Rude Mechanic* (project for Beaconsfield, November 1996)