

In 2010 Ruth Bain and Dr Kate Daw approached The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) about establishing an Art Club. Now successfully in its second year it provides a forum for regular discussions about contemporary art and culture with visits to exhibitions, artists studios and a range of art museums and galleries. Ruth and Kate explain how Art Club developed.

INSITE: Can you tell us about how Art Club began?

RB: Kate and I had spent a lot of time discussing art and decided that we wanted to do something more professional together, so we approached ACCA and talked to them about the suite of activities that they were running and if there was any potential to work with them.

KD: A really key need that we had identified was the lack of opportunity for people who really wanted to have an extended conversation about art exhibitions outside the student environment.

RB: If you work in the art world you are privy to those sorts of opportunities, but I have had the experience of working in galleries and when people came in you didn't always have the time to spend an hour talking about the show but I could see they were interested and had valid responses to contribute. We were not sure how it would work at first but although we set Art Club (AC) up as separate company from ACCA we operate through their channels.

KD: The relationship with ACCA is essential and reassuring to participants who receive their AC notices from ACCA. We also liked that ACCA's focus is on contemporary art.

RB: It works because ACCA were open to it. We didn't want to create work for them, as they do a lot on a small budget, so AC is a bit of a pop-up project going on in their building. They have a program of five exhibitions a year and we decided to do two sessions for every show. We go in with a group maximum of twelve, so that we can get everyone around a table and

we give a presentation on the artists during the visit. The format depends a bit on the show.

KD: We provide a bit of a context for the show. For example with the Nathan Coley exhibition, we talked about the British art scene in the 90s and in particular the Glasgow art scene that Nathan came out of and then talked more specifically about his projects.¹ The year starts with a new group and we build up a rapport with them. We are a bit Margaret and David or good cop, bad cop about the art and we use our disagreement to demonstrate the different ways that you can look at art.

RB: We also find ourselves talking about bigger subjects, from utopian architecture through to religion, and we have to be ready to take the conversation wherever it wants to go and it is never the same.

KD: We have two groups of twelve, one on Thursday and the other on Saturday. Many participants have rejoined in the second year because they have established relationships between themselves and because the conversations are always new with different exhibitions to draw on.

RB: The people who come to AC are generally not artists or collectors; it's a diverse group of mostly professionals that has included geneticists, architects, teachers, lawyers and some museum and gallery staff. They each bring different perspectives and it can get feisty.

KD: The participants frequently see things differently from us and from each other. For example the geneticist was very interested in the random nature of occurrences and, looking at a particular

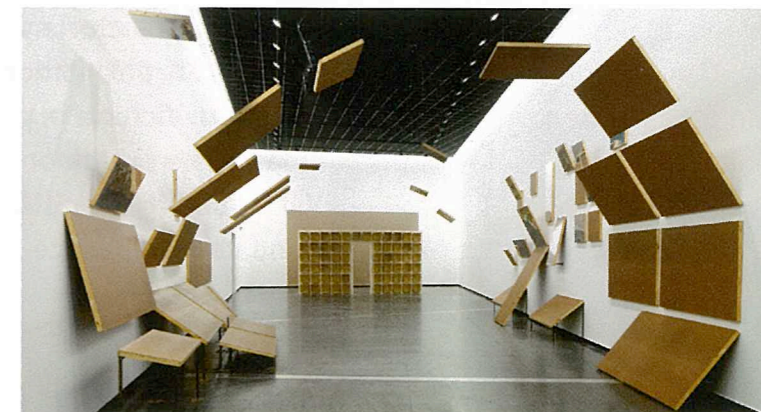
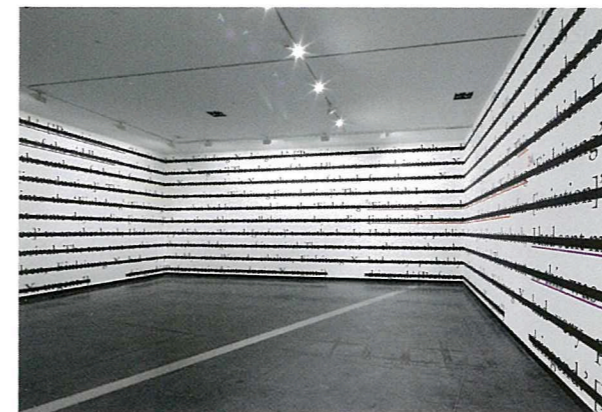
work, was able to draw parallels from a science perspective of how cells and mutations behave. That created a basis for a discussion with the rest of the group that we may not have gotten to without her perspective.

RB: We make visits to other venues in a gallery crawl around Melbourne and we went to the Sydney Biennale last year and MONA this year. The interstate trips are organised by the individuals and then we meet them at the destination. Some people find the contemporary art scene and commercial galleries uninviting and lacking engagement with visitors.

KD: The aim is to create an environment where there are no stupid questions and people can express themselves. New shows at ACCA are frequently challenging and opaque and there can be negative reactions, but after some conversation they can see more of what is going on and don't feel that they are being duped by an apparent lack of meaning in an artwork.

RB: Our visits away from ACCA are very important to us, we include artist-run spaces, commercial galleries, public galleries, university galleries etc, and seeing that web of activity and how they interconnect is vital. They can see how a commercial dealer such as Anna Schwartz Gallery presents Callum Morton's work and then see his commissioned artwork, *Babylonia* on display in a private collection at MONA.² They can see how the pathways in the art world function more or less successfully and as a kind of organism. That is a good counter to the singular view that the art world is overly competitive.

KD: Last year was a big year being our



Left: installation view of the Joseph Kosuth exhibition, 'Waiting for -] Texts for Nothing' Samuel Beckett, in play, at ACCA in December 2010. Photographer: Christian Cappuro. Right: Peter Cripps' installation, 'Towards an elegant solution', for his exhibition at ACCA in June 2010. Photograph: Andrew Curtis.

first year and we went to the Melbourne Art Fair in addition to the Sydney Biennale.³

RB: We have created a website for AC participants who can go there for resources including video clips and links that some look at before a visit while others refer to it occasionally. We both are busy with other jobs so we put things up when we get time.

KD: They get different perspectives from the both of us because I have an arts practice and Ruth has a lot of gallery experience and we also get guests in periodically to talk to the group. Charlotte Day (Associate Curator, ACCA) and Juliana Engberg (Artistic Director, ACCA) have dropped in and the artist Peter Cripps joined us and talked in detail about his work.

RB: We see it as a reciprocal relationship between participants and ACCA. They get invited to ACCA events and VIP nights where artists will come up and talk to them. Participants have a sense that AC is a safe place to ask questions and discuss artworks and artists and curators know that they are genuinely interested and serious about learning more.

INSITE: Do you discuss different museum types with AC?

RB: When we visited MONA we talked about the different sorts of museums and classifications.⁴

KD: At MONA there is a display of objects that have a dodgy provenance immersed in a freestanding water-tank to illustrate their murky past. We will come back to a discussion of MONA again now that there is criticism filtering back and more attention is given to its

premise and the singularity of a private museum. MONA is fantastic but you don't want all museums to become like that, it is an eccentric's vision and you do need museums that are going to be an orderly reference point for our cultural history.

KD: You do want a bit of the fun stuff and there are some things that they are doing with the displays at MONA that are sensory and that activate other elements like touch. It is a more visceral experience.

RB: I think that there are swings and roundabouts to what we want from museums in different times. Coming out from the Wunderkammer displays there must have been a great sense of progress when things started to be organised into categories.

KD: I agree, you don't want every museum to be idiosyncratic.

RB: We do a lot of explaining and placing artworks in a context and we try to provide a pathway for people who are not used to navigating contemporary art.

KD: It is great for AC to be visiting all sorts of galleries where there is strong support for contemporary art and issues but it has also been great to return to ACCA and see how the same space can be radically transformed by each exhibition. This was illustrated with the *Mortality* show, curated with a singular vision by Juliana Engberg, where she created a passage from birth to death, that was followed a month later by the more austere Joseph Kosuth exhibition.

RB: It's not just about seeing the art its about understanding how a curator can mould the art into a vision and how a gallery can take on a certain flavour.

Jenny Holzer talked to the AC when

she was here for her show at ACCA and that discussion took us in new directions given the politics in her work. We have to be there ready to talk about issues and to make sure everyone feels included.

Art Club will continue next year and we are currently discussing how to expand it in other directions with different audiences.

Ruth Bain has an extensive background in the arts working in both public and private galleries and has overseen over 200 individual exhibitions and managed major public art commissions in Australia. Dr Kate Daw is a practicing artist and art lecturer and has worked in the Art#2 ACCA Regional Tour exhibition at the Hamilton Art Gallery until 18 September.

Art Club registrations for 2012 will open in February. Check the website for details including costs.

Enquiries: mail@artclub.com.au
www.accaonline.org.au/artclubacca

¹ Nathan Coley, *Heaven Is A Place Where Nothing Ever Happens*, at ACCA in association with Melbourne International Arts Festival, September 2010.

For more on his exhibition visit: www.accaonline.org.au/NathanColeyAppearances or on his work: http://haunchofvenison.com/artists/nathan_coley

² *Babylonia* was exhibited at ACCA for the 2005 Melbourne International Arts Festival. Morton is the inaugural recipient of the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust Commission, a partnership between the Trust and ACCA.

⁴ <http://mona.net.au>

³ www.artfair.com.au
www.biennaleofsydney.com.au