

# SIT-IN TO MAKE A STAND!

*Visual Artists SAY NO TO NOTHING but YES TO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT national action  
August 14 2004*

With it's typical bodgy flair the Art Life blog quipped that the 'Visual Artists SAY NO TO NOTHING...' campaign presented 'a negation of negation that leads to the brave acceptance of nothingness'. Hey there! Wouldn't that be a 'brave insistence on somethingness'? For it was 'something', it was acknowledgement, in fact, that motivated the nationwide call to occupy the floors of public art galleries and museums in each Australian capital city. This action took place on August 14 at 2.00pm EST, when visual artists and sympathisers staged a synchronised 15 minute sit-in to make a stand for contemporary art in Australia.

Coordinated by the Sydney Art Seen Society (SASS), the sit-in was in support of the circulating 'STARVING VISUAL ARTIST – put the cliché to rest' petition. This is in light of the radical discrepancy between visual artists' contribution to the economy and their decreasing incomes and calls for the reinstatement of an improved, nationally standardised schedule of artists' fees payable when exhibiting in federally funded galleries and institutions. While the embers of much art activism were snuffed out years ago by a radiating belief in the market, many who attended the SIT-IN seemed to have the embers of old rekindled. From this, a movement will flare of true and sustaining source, illuminated by knowledge's medium and acknowledgement. Fight on, let those embers flare, let us artists dare.

*For more information go to  
<http://sydneyartseen.blog-city.com>  
Lisa Kelly & Gail Hastings for SASS*

**The following are reports submitted by individuals who were involved in the preparation and action on Saturday 14 August 2004.**

*'Say NO to NOTHING...' NGV, Melbourne SIT-IN  
14 August 2004*

*Photo credit: Sanne Mestrom*



NEW SOUTH WALES

Museum of Contemporary Art

1.58pm – A SASS member and I entered the MCA. I had my newly silk-screened t-shirt on, and a bag emblazoned with ‘Say No to Nothing but Yes to Acknowledgement’ and she had some leaflets with her. Being the second last day of the Biennale, the ground floor was crowded but it was time to sit and if nobody else was going to go first, then I had to. It felt odd to hit the floor and not be in a school group! Deborah sat down next to me and people were coming in in little bunches, looking over quizzically for direction and accepting they just had to sit down. There were maybe 50-60 people, mostly women and a few strangers, some of whom were chatting. It felt comfortable and momentous, a successful feat... an occupation, where serious issues were at stake and our presence was undeniable. You could hear people getting calls from other states, checking in excitedly. Visitors kept coming through, some inquisitively taking leaflets and pausing (luckily Gail had made banners). Others were defiantly strutting past (are we sick of protesters?). When the ABC TV crew came with their camera and lights, and when Gail was being interviewed the tone sobered immediately. The force of this solemnity has hope and strength. Taking a critical stance with this group of associates and professionals reinforced my belief that attempting to realign the dubious trend of neglect for issues in the arts was a worthy cause.

From Sarah Goffman

NORTHERN TERRITORY

Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory

On this loveliest of Saturday arvos, dedicated (about ten) art lovers and artists were present to sit, chat and drink coffee on the roundabout outside the Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Interested museum staff and visitors approached us to gain an understanding of our quest, and accepted flyers for the cause. The opening of the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award had been the night before, and the mayhem of the Darwin Festival had just started. Given the madness of August in Darwin, it was impressive to actually get a group together at all. Although united in our feelings for the recognition of the artist as a professional, much discussion focussed on the role of artist run spaces, how wages could be standardised and the role of government in arts. Thinking of our peers in other states sitting at the same time, for the same cause was a warming feeling, and we attempted to send the warmth back!

From Hayley West



‘Say NO to NOTHING...’ MCA, Sydney SIT-IN  
14 August 2004

Photo credit: Jane Polkinghorne

QUEENSLAND

Queensland Art Gallery

Coming through the entrance of the Queensland Art Gallery I am confronted with a vision of artists sprawling in front of the watermall; sitting, standing, talking, and waiting for the fifteen minute artists’ SIT-IN to commence. While descending the escalators towards the allocated meeting point I am scanning the mass of bodies for the crowd of passionate protesters – hopeful creators of new arts policy, catalysts to a new era of valued contemporary practice, stoned arts students and a Korean tour group? Oh, oh, oh, wait up. I see it now, the gallery to the right holds a whole room of chairs lined up (wow, they’re organised), the room filling, a grand piano? The security officer sees my confusion and asks which group I’m with: the conservatorium student showcase or the other one, pointing to a group of five or six equally confused people standing over at the watermall. I consider hijacking the conservatorium crowd for 15 minutes but decide it would mess with their programming too much. So I join the group of artists with the obvious line, “Is this the SIT-IN?” I start laughing and sit for fifteen minutes, while debating whether the lure of free alcohol would have increased numbers. Our total number was eight, which is definitely better than seven or zero. So my ideals are not altogether defeated, perhaps just deflated. Idealism is apparently dangerous and I can see why; to request the unattainable will ultimately disappoint. Luckily, I believe the artists’ SIT-IN was not about the idealistic (though my ideas of how it might have been were) but was about the reasonable. How it is reasonable and fair for artists to request payment (and respect) for their contributions to culture. This endeavour for the reasonable and fair will rightly continue in whatever form needed, until it is fulfilled.

From Michelle Oxenham

## SOUTH AUSTRALIA

*Art Gallery of South Australia*

Maybe it was the rare piece of sunshine after weeks of grey skies. Or maybe no one wanted to disrupt their Saturday market shopping. As usual a million emails went out about the SIT-IN but only the dedicated, die-hard trustees turned up. Twenty-five artists came out to protest at the Art Gallery of South Australia, which is a fair number for a small city like Adelaide. We were all assembled out the front of the gallery, smiling nervously when we were met by a very nice policeman who was coming to check up on our angry mob. We progressed to the contemporary section of the AGSA, which at the time was occupied by the SALA (South Australian Living Artist) week exhibition. The SALA festival was started a few years ago by Paul Greenaway and Sam Hill-Smith (two SA commercial gallerists). It aims to highlight living artists from South Australia. The Premier and associated polities and patrons like SALA very much, it makes them feel like the South Australian arts community is alive and well. Although, sitting on the floor waiting for just one visitor to come through we wondered how much concern there really is. Where were all the keen arts going South Australians? Downstairs at *The Edwardians*. Sitting amongst a celebration of the work of contemporary SA artists, it seemed an appropriate setting for a protest in aid of decent gallery fees. It reminded me how important it is to try and effect simple change when the important things like standardised artist's fees and welfare reform tend to get left off the agenda by people who can't remember living off less than \$18,000 per annum. Well done to all the people who attended and organised these protests.

*From Bridget Currie*

## VICTORIA

*National Gallery of Victoria, The Ian Potter Centre, Federation Square*

*Part one: leading up to the sit-in*

The Say No to Nothing campaign generated a feisty Melbourne response producing an intensive and complex series of discussions within and between some artists' projects. It catalysed artists to make connections with each other that expanded beyond the usual taking-care-of-business routines, and opened a space in which differences, possibilities and shifting ideas might be articulated. I reckon that this is only the beginning for discussions in which artists might reconsider and produce other ways and modes of determining their relations with institutional structures. This campaign brought to the fore the economic conditions we artists are constantly faced with, and this was an attempt to make public the simple fact that the artworks that our public institutions brandish as exemplars of cultural product, are exploited... and we let this happen. These institutional spaces rely on the 'content production' of artists, which is a dodgy



*'Say NO to NOTHING...' AGSA, Adelaide SIT-IN 14 August 2004  
Andrew Best & The Fuzz  
Photo credit: Chris Tamm*

notion, and this needs to be acknowledged. A much larger debate around what we do, how we do it, and the way we represent and distribute our practices seems to have emerged from the whole experience and needs more time to be developed and articulated. The whole issue gets a lot stickier from here on, but the sit-in itself was a public gesture of support for each other and the work that we as artists do together.

*Part two: the day of the sit-in*

The weather on the day was absolutely shit-house, the most wintry in all of this year. Five of us met on the corner of Flinders Street, and it seemed that we'd be the only contingent for a while, which was a bit depressing at the time. But we pressed on towards the massive public screening of the Olympic opening ceremony, into the NGV atrium. Others gradually joined us, until the numbers reached about 120. Some of us spoke to gallery patrons explaining the purpose of our presence; others collected petition signatures or just sat it out together.

*From Bianca Hester*

## Drawings

# Alex Pittendrigh

*Mir 11*  
*11 June – 2 July 2004*  
*by Ruth Learner*

Located eleven floors above a car park, Mir 11 gallery has an uncanny ambience. The wedged-shaped space forms the central lobby of Design Park, made up of design and architecture offices. The soft murmurings of work-day life are offset by primordial cries from the lifts as they relentlessly move between floors. The juxtaposition is an ideal setting for the patterned chaos underpinning this drawing show, in particular Alex Pittendrigh's complex, delicate work.

Born from a baroque sensibility, his floral creations have evolved through the natural forms of art nouveau into a species all of its own. Although the work has been informed by Pittendrigh's passion for classicism, in particular Italian art and design, it is an intuitive response to contemplation of these forms rather than any scholarly tribute. "Design is a jumping off point..." he says. "The idea is that design is unravelling, reverting back to nature or becoming a hybrid form between a design and a specimen."

There is a viral-like quality to the delicate folds of meandering blossom, subtly rendered in faint to angry pink, shot with poisonous blue veins. Each drawing too has its own ongoing evolution. The muscular stem rooted in abundant flesh becomes increasingly tenuous as it rises into fine lines and white space. The viewer is drawn to contemplate these meanderings, which inevitably spawn another progeny. "The pictorial space encourages the viewer to interpret or 'resolve' the work... like unfolding a map of their imagination," says Pittendrigh. It is perhaps this space that gives the work its potent dynamic; at times the flora seems to be growing in front of our eyes.

Pittendrigh refers to each work in terms of a life cycle. "The drawing as such doesn't have a planned subject. It takes on its own life and maps out whatever form it might become, and then dies... like some strange experiment." It is this sense of curiosity and of the specimen that fascinates him. Having spent much time contemplating art in museums and libraries, he creates work that lends itself to such study, to the über collector. "I want to create work that functions in a private space like a curiosity



*Alex Pittendrigh*  
*The Show of Monsters, 2004*  
*39 x 28 inches*  
*Watercolour & pencil on paper*  
*Photo credit: John Brash*

cabinet or specimen box; art that is for absorption and contemplation." The underlying principle of introspection is reflected too in the idea of the drawing as 'study'. "Drawing is often a rehearsal for something else, for the 'unknowable' or 'unattainable' thing," he says. "For me it is the thing...like a constantly evolving life form." There is pathology also, in both the laborious process of creating such detailed work, plus within the work itself.

Beyond obvious design influences, Pittendrigh's drawings additionally exist as abstractions of journeys, such as his 2002 Rome residency, as well as moments in history. "They show the mind marking time; a chain of thought, with a flicker of tangible things," he says. "The drawing embodies the corporeal experience in a subjective mental patterning." Pittendrigh's work goes well beyond the mere representational. It is an investigation into the process of creating, and a charting of psychological responses to both historic and personal narratives.

*Drawings at Mir11 was a group exhibition, which also included Nick Mangan, Chris Hill & Nadine Christensen.*

**Ruth Learner is a Melbourne based writer.**

*qnoors\_inbox (queer non object oriented radio signal)*

# *Jaye Hayes & Jason Sweeney*

2004 Australian Culture Now  
Bootlab, Berlin & The Australian Centre for the Moving  
Image, Melbourne  
7 – 13 June 2004  
by Anna Hickey-Moody



Jaye Hayes & Jason Sweeney  
*qnoors\_inbox*, 2004  
Video Still  
Image courtesy of the artists

What can you plug into? What do you 'put in' to the networks that you connect to? On what levels are you open to receive? These are just some of the questions posed by *qnoors\_inbox* a week long, interdisciplinary, installation artwork by Jaye Hayes and Jason Sweeney. This show, however, offers the viewer more than a thoughtful collection of four syllable words can suggest. The fact that we receive and transmit as nodes in a range of interconnected networks – work, friends, home, traffic, cyberspace – goes without saying these days. But there is often an unconscious nature to our exchanges, productions and consumptions, and this is where the problem lies.

Email and text messaging has revolutionised the media of popular, contemporary communication and, of course, transformed the content of much communication in doing so. A heated argument via snail mail is somehow less intense than the sonic, vibrating assault of a stream of text messages. People can be much more informal or even intimate in an email than a hard copy memo would usually allow. Consumers buy a product most often because of its utility, yet certainly the vibe an object omits constitutes a defining factor of its appeal... even if this energy isn't in material form. What happens then, when the utility of media is removed, if one is to focus only on the product of the media itself, or on the network of

send-receive and production-consumption that inscribes contemporary life and which many contemporary consumers reproduce on a daily basis? Perhaps *qnoors\_inbox* comes as close to answering, or at least commenting on this line of inquiry as a body can, while still utilising the media in question.

*qnoors\_inbox* undertakes a task which, I must confess, I am partial to. It asks participants and respondents to deconstruct commercialised methods of consuming and conceptualising art. This somewhat direct query is softened in its mode of delivery as Hayes and Sweeney offer material to be experienced: soundscapes, images, and interstitial spaces that cannot be consumed via popular methods of high art consumption. On the other hand, quite a different minor economy of sonic or aural, visual and kinaesthetic exchanges rupture any preconceptions of 'consumable culture' that an audience member might bring with them to the 'inbox'. Not that we are prevented from consumption in the box; it is the nature of what is consumed and its context in the gallery, which might lead an observer to doubt the integrity of the didactic panel on the wall beside the 'art'. Which in turn provides a point of contrast to the still largely popular genre of narrative based live performance art. One of the most interesting issues raised by the work springs from this cultural imagining of live performance art as a narrative based form. This preconception framed the awkward situation of *qnoors\_inbox* as part of *2004 Australian Culture Now*, an exhibition of multi-media, and largely visual interactive art, which was for all intents and purposes a fabulous exhibition. This collaborative project between the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) was marketed as 'one of the most ambitious surveys of contemporary Australian art and culture in recent history' but the organisers simply did not know what to do with a work that involved a real person. As part of the presentation of *qnoors\_inbox* an artist was situated in the box, and the evident curatorial unease this generated raised interesting questions for me about popular approaches to consuming live art.

There was no apparent trouble with pictures of bodies, projections of bodies, simulated bodies or pre-recorded bodies. These somewhat diluted, or mediated, corporeal forms were positioned quite comfortably within *Australian Culture Now*. But the delicate, complex and real body of flesh so political in its un-erasable presence that was featured in *qnoors\_inbox*, confounded the economy of art consumption that renders art as product distinct from the labour of art production. There was a working body in the box. The process of production was transparent and therefore not high art. Furthermore, as a non-narrative and non-linear work there seemed to be some anxiety over *qnoor\_inbox's* composition. A live work that was composed onsite and featured in a curated exhibition, the composer and author was also dubbed the educator by observers as they mined his thoughts on processes, conceptual development and project goals. Far from



Jaye Hayes & Jason Sweeney  
*qnoors\_inbox*  
Video Still, 2004  
Image courtesy of the artists

constituting a sideline or overlay to the work, this dialogic relationship with the audience, intentional or otherwise, spoke volumes about the potentially disconcerting ways in which *qnoors\_inbox* asked participants in its network to step in and experience the relay of send-receive and production-consumption that affects contemporary life in an often utilitarian way.

In what ways do media of expression constitute the kinds of transmissions you send and receive? Try sending the media minus the expression and watch what you create. You engage with a minor economy of production and consumption before even moving towards language. Not to mention utility. And, as the stream of questions emerging from innocent bystanders suggests, this is an experiment that can be disturbing.

Residues of this project can be viewed at:  
<http://fluidtransmissions.va.com.au/qnoors/inbox>

**Anna Hickey-Moody is a writer, dancer and teacher, currently working at Monash University.**

# Peloton

## *an art-critical space appears in the material city*

Chippendale  
Sydney, New South Wales  
by Billy Gruner

*Below: Peloton Exhibition Number 1*  
Image courtesy of Salvatore Panatteri



It seems an understatement to claim there is a crisis concerning the lack of credible exhibition spaces in Sydney. In post 20<sup>th</sup> century terms, this is an issue that local and visiting artists alike must attend. There are two fundamentally important aspects of the ‘artist run space.’ The first concerns accessibility, the second is what they provide virtually gratis to culture. In short, these are significant places for the establishment of new ideas, yet despite Sydney’s profile as a contemporary centre of art it is clear that the needs of a generally impoverished local milieu and the mounting requests of as many artists from other places, outweigh the capacity of the few existing venues who struggle to maintain. And if the ‘artist run space’ in Sydney is now more important than ever, it is reasonable to claim that this lack has as much to do with rising real estate values and with how their social significance remains underrated by critics, collectors and those who administer the institutionalisation of art.

Against this backdrop a new Sydney gallery opened in August to be run by Matthys Gerber, Salvatore Panatteri, and Gilles Ryder. Peloton’s opening is exciting because it is bound to a kind of inherited critical expectation. This is because Peloton’s Meagher Street site in Chippendale has been associated with a number of significant ‘artist

run’ venues over recent years – namely, Lisa Kelly and Alex Gawronski’s Blue Grau, Jason Markou and Jeorg Hubmann’s Block Gallery, and Barry Keldoulis’ GBK. In my opinion the staging of Peloton at this same site is a positive step, and to some extent will redress an absence. A vacancy in credible artist venues made especially concerning after the demise of other important spaces in recent years like, Pendulum, CBD, and Front room, amongst others.

This brief local history of ‘artist run spaces’ makes up a list that must now be inclusive of a few still operating projects, such as, Firstdraft, Wren, Phatspace, and MOP. The recent opening of Peloton has a lot to live up to in this regard. In a more extended historical sense, these different kinds of spaces have formed an invaluable cultural network and critical lineage as alternative pathways through aesthetic elitism, artistic snobbery and the institutional privileging of a select few therein. This is because artist run spaces provide crucial links to publicly recognisable activity within an otherwise closed shop mentality.

It is too early say if Peloton will become a place beloved by those using it. But as far as I can tell Peloton’s opening show, *On Lying in Bed with Chesterton* by Alison McGregor, was a success. If I had to describe Peloton’s sensibility (after seeing the second exhibition *Grappling* by John Aslanidis and Judith Duquemin) it would involve a sensitivity to painting and object making, installation, and sound work. In light of Sydney’s poor reputation as an under resourced and institutionally ambivalent place to work in, I see Peloton contributing a much needed boost to the materialist city’s profile, whilst fulfilling aspirations or art-critical expectations. Perhaps a full-blooded secession is what’s actually required from Sydney’s ‘artist run network’ but that’s a matter for another discussion entirely.

***Billy Gruner is an artist based in Sydney. He co-founded MOP Projects and more recently Factory 11 with the ‘Sydney Concrete Art Group’ where he works curating, writing and in project management.***