

Title

Testing Grounds – beyond the studio

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Abstract

While undergraduate education values and cultivates individual studio practice it also must respond to the changing reality of contemporary practice where young artists must be resourceful in how they make their work and where they exhibit it. This paper discusses examples of how locations such as Testing Grounds in Southbank, can provide rich experiences that are both challenging and engaging, as an alternative site for making and exhibiting beyond the traditional studio.

Biographies

Dr Martine Corompt

Dr Martine Corompt is a lecturer and studio leader in the area of Time-based arts, School of Art RMIT. She teaches across first, second and third year students, with a specific focus on moving image, animation, mixed media installation and collaborative practice. Since 1995 Martine has exhibited widely in individual and group exhibitions, locally, nationally and internationally including works such as *Torrent* exhibited at Contemporary Art Tasmania and the Centre for Contemporary Photography 2015 and *Tide* exhibited at Westspace gallery 2012. Subjects such as the reductive representation of bodies of water and the natural and unnatural landscape contributed to theme of her PhD research project titled: *Cartoon and the Cult of Reduction* completed at the VCA Melbourne University in 2017.

Arie Rain Glorie

I am a curator and artist based in Naarm Melbourne. In 2015 I graduated with an honours degree in Fine Art, from RMIT.

As an artist I make video, live-art and installations, predominately for festivals. My practice is often collaborative and responsive.

As a curator I experiment with exhibition making, events and audience engagement. I am the program director and curator of Testing Grounds and the curator and co-founder of the Centre for Dramaturgy and Curation.

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Introduction

Studio as both a physical place and methodology is the foundation of fine art pedagogy and also the most sensitive to external pressures. (G. FORSYTH, 2009) Institutional pressures on space and resources as well as changing conditions in the art-world ecology are both contributing to the evolution of new models of studio practice. This paper will give examples of how new models of studio have been explored through a collaborative relationship between Testing Grounds and RMIT School of Art as described by Martine Corompt (lecturer in the BA Fine Art) and Arie Rain Glorie (Program Director and Curator, Testing Grounds).

In Melbourne throughout the 1990's the commercial gallery as the dominant site of display was increasingly shared with Artist run spaces, but both were still reliant on the model of the gallery as the display space and the artwork produced elsewhere (such as a studio). Artist run spaces as well as artist studio collectives, proliferated because of affordable real estate in inner city locations, and up until the early 2000's this was still achievable. The right-of-passage that was typical of art-school graduates, where they were able to set up studio collectives in cheap warehouse spaces, has become more and more unaffordable. And not necessarily appealing.

Alternative models of studio practice are not new with origins in historical movements such as Fluxus from the 1960's which sought to dematerialise and democratise the art object in favour of performance and games. Also later in the 1990's with the development of models we are now more familiar with such as 'socially engaged art', 'community-based art', 'experimental communities,' participatory art, interventionist or collaborative art. (BISHOP, 2009) This evolution (or revolution) is in response to considerations that are both practical (space, costs, commitments) and ideological,

signaling a shift in the distinction between sites of production and sites of exhibition, as well as the role of art as a system of production, to one of an art experience.¹

We are now also seeing this tendency reflected in cultural policy such as Creative Victoria's Creative States Strategy. (CREATIVE VICTORIA, 2019) In this strategy, they identify key actions that look at how creative practitioners (an all-encompassing term that includes visual artists) can bolster our services-based economy by investing 'more than \$115 million over 4 years and... provide unparalleled access to cultural experiences for local communities and visitors'. (CREATIVE VICTORIA, 2019) It recognizes that artists and audiences are increasingly drawn to experiences over products or objects. It links fine arts into the services-based economy of the creative industries, extending the arts into design and architecture, gaming, and fashion. Festivals, civic space, and public institutions- places of tourism- are a part of this services-based economy.

While this move could be understood as nothing more than a glib government marketing strategy in which the fine arts are used to promote tourism, it does recognise existing cultural changes as well as endeavouring to drive change regarding *how* and *where* we experience art. While undergraduate education values and *must* still cultivate individual studio practice we should also respond to this changing reality of contemporary practice where young artists are increasingly making experience-based projects that can only be tested in situ and draw on other non-individual studio based practices.

Critical reflection on studio-based education

Arie Glorie is the Program Director and Curator at Testing Grounds which is supported by the state government through Creative Victoria. Prior to this he was a student in Expanded Studio Practice in the School of Art RMIT. Arie's undergraduate studio experience at RMIT helped to shape the new Testing Grounds program in 2016, which he co-wrote with The Projects, who operate the site. Combined with The Projects design methodology of letting people decide how space should be used rather than prescribing this, the shortcomings of the conventional studio were instrumental in formulating an alternative model.

¹ This change has been captured in organisations such as Testing Grounds and has been discussed extensively by authors such as Nicolas Bourriaud, Grant Kester & Claire Bishop



Figure 1: Testing an interactive audio installation. Photo credit: Arie Rain Glorie, 2015

During his studies, Arie used a studio regularly at first, but by the time of graduation he had grown distant from it. The work Arie created was increasingly not well suited for white cube gallery exhibitions. The studio became less a site of production and often a place of administration and meetings. To this end, it was very valuable to have a studio, but it became a different type of site of production.

During his degree, Arie started to produce large scale multi-disciplinary events, new media and performance art projects, projection installations and multi-modal projects that blurred the line between artist and curator. Festivals, pop-up spaces, and public space became sites of production or 'studios'- where 1:1 material testing could be trialled, production value (lighting and sound) could be learnt and work could be tested on public audiences.

In addition, this working methodology is project-based, as opposed to the definition of a practice that was encouraged at that time. The project-based artist doesn't visit a studio each day and hone their craft like a painter, rather different types of spaces are needed at different times of the year. There are cycles of administration, production phases, testing periods, and research and development months. This methodology is also about

economics; a studio would be kept all year long if it were affordable (even though it may not be needed year long), but this is a luxury that the current generation cannot afford.

Self-identifying early on that his work would not be picked up by a commercial gallery Arie began concentrating on making art for festivals, where artists work can generate money through commissions and receive professional development support. Four years on from finishing his degree, Arie's touring opportunities now also becomes a factor that again changes the way he uses studios and sites, as there could be long periods of time where the work is only being presented and not being made. Here an alternative arts economy was introduced to Arie that operates alongside the commercial gallery sector and that can be just as profitable. This collaborative, project-based economy extends to public art and public programs in civic spaces, public institutions, and museums.

During his time at Testing Grounds, Arie often worked with students on site to develop projects and present new artworks. These students can be of any age and level of experience, ranging from undergraduates to Masters students and PhD candidates, but they are consistently challenged by their expectations about what is going to happen outside of the studio. More often than not, they find the materials are not behaving as they did in the studio, audiences behave differently (particularly because Testing Grounds is not a white cube gallery and attracts non visual-arts audiences), they can't control all environmental elements around the work (light, sound, temperature) and that marketing a work, can matter more than the artist statement. Evident in the name Testing Grounds prides itself on providing a space for people to test and realise these things, as a model or for professional development. These realisations could be more in-depth, opening up greater opportunity for experimentation if students were better prepared for working outside of the studio.

It was this interest in models for working outside the conventional studio that led to the role of Program Director and Curator of Testing Grounds where Arie co-wrote the new program for the new infrastructure at 1-23 City Rd in 2016. The site is supported by Creative Victoria as a part of their Creative States Strategy.



Figure 2: View of Testing Grounds from above, during Melbourne Design Week 2017 Photo credit: Testing Grounds

A relationship begins:

The next section describes examples of RMIT School of Art undergraduate student experiences who engaged with Testing Grounds as an alternative site for making and exhibiting beyond the studio.

In 2017, due to building repairs resulting in a lack of space on campus at RMIT it became necessary for undergraduate lecturer Martine Corompt, to locate an alternative teaching space for a group of 18 students. The Portable Art class evolved as a six-week module that encouraged collaboration and interdisciplinary practice through the challenge of remaining mobile and working in a compact and/or modular form. One of the various tasks was to spend a day off-campus with their 'portable studios', originally this took place at the Food Court (NICO REDDAWAY, 2013-2016) (an ARI located at the Docklands) but after this venue closed for redevelopment, the newly opened Testing Grounds seemed like an ideal option as another off-site student experience.

One of the collaborative aspects to Portable Art was that each student didn't set up their own final project, but instead they set up one another's. In some instances, instructions or provocations were included in the work, sometimes tools and fixing materials, sometimes nothing - and so to varying extents the portable artwork was curated and reinvented by the person setting up the work. Situating this project at Testing Grounds which has its own infrastructure of fixings and hanging systems and strong ethos of collaborative practice, it became a great opportunity to expand the works out of a white-cube environment.

Testing grounds 24 credit point studio with Arie, Martine & Carolyn.

Following on from the success of the Portable Art project at Testing Grounds, the next project in 2018 was more ambitious in the form of a 24-credit point Fine Art studio, a core subject or major in the undergraduate semester enrolment. This was a more formal collaboration between Testing Grounds and the School of Art. It was tempting to locate the whole studio experience off-campus, but we were aware that this might be a little challenging as there was limited shelter and classroom-like spaces available at Testing Grounds on a consistent basis. Between Arie, Martine and RMIT colleague Carolyn Eskdale (who co-taught the class), a model was shaped that proposed a project-based art experience existing beyond the studio and explored the nexus between sites of production and sites of display. The course took place partly in the studio (on campus) and partly onsite at Testing Grounds comprising of weekly classes and intensive workshops culminating in a student-led live event/exhibition. In addition, because Testing Grounds is a public site with an office that anyone can walk into, students could visit outside of these hours to test work and ask questions.

Students enrolled in this course from a variety of specialist areas, Print, Painting, Drawing, Sculpture, Gold & Silversmithing, Video and Sound, and few had any previous experience of Testing Grounds but were intrigued by the notion of organising their own public event. They were also captivated by the freedom and guiding principle of calculated risk – things that you can do at Testing Grounds that can't be done on campus. In the student induction, Arie explained that 'fires are ok, water is fine, cooking,

planting, and even smashing things are all within the scope of calculated risk.² For the students this was somewhat mind-blowing.

Working within the availability of the various structures and infrastructures, we fell into a routine of moving and working between the two spaces (RMIT and Testing Grounds). Some students were still attached to the idea of Testing Grounds as an exhibition space where they simply displayed finished works, but others whole-heartedly worked with the principals and unique characteristics of the site.

The students were asked to consider the following when developing their projects:

- Working with the elements, light, wind, noise, heat, cold
- Interfacing with the public
- Utilising the modular infrastructures of Testing Grounds
- Utilising found materials of Testing Grounds that can be returned
- Considering temporary works
- Consideration of the social aspect of Testing Grounds - the bar, food etc
- Embracing calculated risk

The students were also encouraged to read through and reflect on Testing Grounds program objectives:

- Cross programming; seeing what emerges when divergent groups come together on-site and work alongside and with each other.
- Development of a flexible and robust creative program, which is not immutable and is free to respond to creativity.
- A shortening of the time between when art is created and when art is presented.
- Pooling of knowledge, information and resources for sharing.
- Seeing how the Testing Grounds infrastructure can participate in creative projects.

² The creative practitioner who uses Testing Grounds is invited to take calculated risks. Risk can be conceptual, physical, material or financial and therefore the potential for failure is invited to be undertaken with full awareness that there may be consequences. - 5.12 Calculated Risk, Glossary of Terms, Terms and Conditions, Testing Grounds Project Agreements 2017.

- A free site to use, within our standard hours of operation.

In addition to daytime projects, the students were keen to organise a night event. A night/after hours event allowed the students to draw on the many social aspects of Testing Grounds - the bar, the fire pit, and of course, the general public. Under Aries supervision and advice, the students organised equipment, worked out the schedule, risk assessment, marketed the event and negotiated the bump in and out. One particular student returned in the semester break to continue working on another two projects.

Here are some examples of the evening



Figure 3 & 4: Martina Clarke *How Long Does It Take*, & *When will it happen*, charcoal dust, canvas, rocks. Photo credit Martina Clarke



Figure 5: Daniel Marks live performance. Photo credit Martine Corompt



Figure 6: Oliver Moir *Sleep Sound*. Photo credit Oliver Moir

Conclusion

The role of Studio will never become redundant in fine art education, but what will change and is changing is the definition of studio. Younger artists will drive this change, because they have to, but also because they want to. Sites such as Testing Grounds provide experimentation, calculated risk, community and ultimately an integral role in demonstrating alternative models of studio. It is future proofing to teach students about working in multiple types of spaces and for different contexts with different outcomes and different audiences.³ With more diverse experiences and testing of different sites of production, we can prepare students to be better equipped to find work in an ever-changing industry that is effected by government agendas, economics, changing key performance indicators that curators and programmers need to meet and the desires of audiences to have new experiences.

The success of Testing Grounds is not simply about the space, but most importantly, it is about the team of people who allow artists to try things and to have faith in their ideas. In our art schools we still need to preserve traditional practices and to also foster new ones. In order to allow both to flourish, we should actively try to encourage and develop different models of studio practice. Testing Grounds has demonstrated that new and emerging models of making and learning are achievable and invaluable in the evolution of contemporary art practice.

There is an inherent optimism in the ecosystem of Testing grounds – it seems to say that against all odds (traffic wind weather) art will prevail!

³ Increasing participation and access is a key action area of the Creative State strategy. Making work for more diverse audiences means leaving the traditional gallery world (which still has huge access problems for non-white people) behind.

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