

Unconventional spaces democratising art

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From shoe boxes to railway stations, unconventional spaces display art for a fraction of the price of traditional galleries.



Aaron Anderson, Suburban Ruin, Image supplied (Sarah Nolan: Silver)

Possibly the world's smallest gallery is hidden in a shady lane behind Melbourne's crowded Swanston Street. Trink Tank consists of a shoebox-size shrine in the wall, in which a single art piece is exhibited.

The tiny 'gallery' is part of a big trend: unconventional arts spaces are popping up in many Australian cities, changing the appreciation and role of contemporary visual art in their local communities.



Image via Trink Tank

<https://www.facebook.com/trinktank/photos/pb.231370310221793.-2207520000.1424321766./1002524506439699/?type=3&theater>

Also in Melbourne is Mailbox, a strip of nineteen tiny restored wooden mailboxes in the entrance foyer of a building, hosting site specific artworks. In Canberra, the recent Design Canberra festival had numerous exhibitions around the city in unusual or unused spaces. Adelaide had a similar experience with the ongoing project 'Renew Adelaide', inspired by New South Wales' Renew Newcastle arts rejuvenation project. Through these Renew projects, empty buildings and shop fronts are revitalized thanks to artist intervention. The aim is to give vibrancy to the city's urban areas to the community's benefit.

At a time in which artists are competing to find galleries and funding, these spaces represent an inexpensive and viable solution. They are inexpensive alternatives to the white cube.

But unconventional spaces are not only an economic solutions for emerging artists. In Sydney renowned photographers from the Ocula group have founded Elizabeth Street Gallery. They are exhibiting work from some of NSW's leading photographers in empty niches on the street. They see their project as a stance, being committed to 'injecting creative imagination into the urban streetscape and democratizing art'.

The democratization of art is a shared goal among the founders of unconventional spaces. While a large part of the population is interested in art, people are often unsure how to access it. They may find traditional galleries intimidating or simply not think of accessing them. With these spaces, viewers come across art accidentally. They provide the unaware passerby with unexpected moments of beauty and reflection.

That's the case with Conductor Projects, developing across two spaces in Sydney's busiest train stations. 'St. James and Museum have over one million people coming or going through the station every year. That level of exposure is hard to come by in most white cube spaces. The broadness of the audience means that people who may not regularly go to galleries are being exposed to artists' work', explains Conductor Projects founder Tristan Chant. Chant explains that one of CP's main objectives is to make the public more comfortable with viewing art. Feedback from CP indicates that there is good value in the project and a strong interest from the community.



Conductor Project, Image supplied

Sarah Nolan, founder of Branch 3D, a shop window space in Sydney, also finds that her idea resonates with the community. 'The feedback has always been positive and appreciative - comments about how they look forward to the installation changeover every four weeks, or how they like this one.'

The window, previously used for a TV and radio repair shop, is part of Sarah's own house. 'We thought operating a window space would be ideal for trialling the process of running a space and gathering an audience for long term plans' The location of Branch 3D is very accessible, being on a busy road and close to public transport and other businesses.

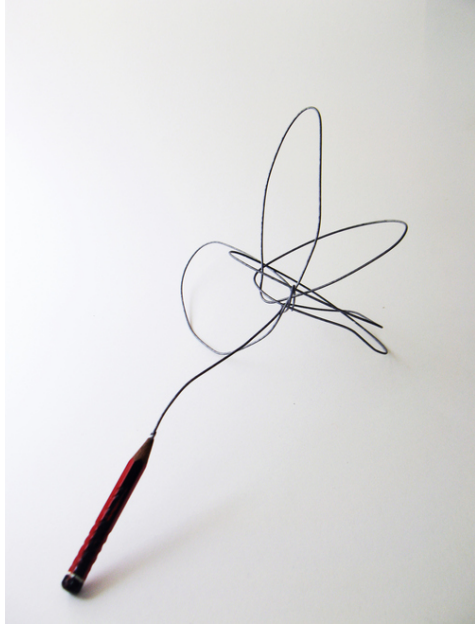
Sometimes unconventional spaces can also be inside a space cluster. That's the case with Canberra's Chute Space. Chute Space is a project initiated by M16 Artspace's studio artists, Kerry Shepherdson and Jeffrey Skewes. It rivals Melbourne's Trink Tank as the smallest gallery in Australia.

The building M16 Artspace moved into was formerly the Griffith Library. Its book return chute was transformed into Chute Space. 'This is an exciting new way to repurpose our building, while paying homage to the history of the building's

fabric,' explains M16 Artspace's exhibition manager Ellen Wignell.

The M16 Artspace building already houses three galleries, along with its twenty-seven studios and five workshop spaces. The role of Chute Space in this lively environment is to allow artists to show experimental miniature works. As a space for miniatures Chute has quite a different focus from M16's main galleries, which focus on solo and group works of a cohesive nature.

Most of the artworks shown in Chute Space have been specifically made for the space. Thus with these smaller dimensions in mind, artists have been able to make site specific work or they have been challenged to make it new and different.



Jacqueline Bradley, Draw a Line, 2015, Image via [Chute Space](http://m16artspace.tumblr.com/post/108610307848/new-year-new-chute-space-exhibition) (<http://m16artspace.tumblr.com/post/108610307848/new-year-new-chute-space-exhibition>)

The same goes for Branch 3D. 'Artists are working in a restrictive space. The limitations allow or provoke the artist to produce work in a way they hadn't anticipated.' Sarah Nolan points out. 'Most of the exhibitors have come up with works that are an extension of what they would usually do. The works end up being very site specific to the space. They are usually different to what they would show in a room where people can walk around the work or at least walk up closer to the work.'

These new art spaces are carving out an important role in the art system but they are unlikely to replace traditional galleries.

Ellen Wignell observes that different kinds of exhibitions call for different approaches. 'While changes in technology and uses of space will make it easier for people to show work informally, the structure and curatorial input of traditional gallery-based exhibits will still be an important part of the exhibiting model.'

Tristan Chant foresees the increment of unconventional spaces as a response to shrinkage in the commercial market. 'This will force artists to start to develop self-initiated opportunities to bridge the gap in the transition from early presentation to professional exhibition.'

He also thinks these kinds of spaces will be increasingly encouraged by governments. 'There is a lot of space out there that may not be practical for commercial businesses to operate in, and there is a big push to make them available to help bolster the creative economy.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naima Morelli is an arts writer and curator who specialized in Italian contemporary art and art from the Asia-Pacific area.