

Liquid Architecture, West Space and Bus Projects are *disorganising*

Channon Goodwin, Joel Stern, and Amelia Wallin

Abstract

“Liquid Architecture, West Space and Bus Projects are *disorganising*.” So began a public statement, first circulated in November 2020, co-signed by the three organisations in question. It went on: “This methodology is not a pathway to merger, but an experimental exercise in cooperative practice beyond previous models of partnership, grounded in principles of solidarity and interdependence.” In this polyvocal essay, Channon Goodwin, Joel Stern, and Amelia Wallin — former Artistic Directors of Bus Projects, Liquid Architecture, and West Space — offer accounts of *disorganising*, which was staged throughout 2020 and 2021 at the organisations’ shared base of Collingwood Yards in Naarm/Melbourne. By contextualising, sharing and reflecting on *disorganising*, we explore how artist-led forms of encounter and exchange can engage publics by challenging hegemonies, critiquing power, and engaging publics in civil dialogue. While making these claims, the essay also acknowledges the limits to achieving change under conditions governed by funding bodies, the demands of ‘professionalisation’ in the sector, and other infrastructures that curtail the radicality of our programs.

Keywords

commons, institutional critique, artist-run, art ecology, funding crisis

Introduction

“Liquid Architecture, West Space and Bus Projects are *disorganising*.” So began a public statement, first circulated in November 2020, co-signed by the three organisations. It went on: “This methodology is not a pathway to merger, but an experimental exercise in cooperative practice beyond previous models of partnership, grounded in principles of solidarity and interdependence.” In this co-authored essay, we set out to offer a critical and creative account of the *disorganising* project, staged throughout 2020 and 2021 at the organisations’ shared base of Collingwood Yards in Naarm/Melbourne. Drawing from public statements, project ephemera, unpublished reflections, and new observations, this essay weaves together our subjective contributions and responses to *disorganising*, drawing from the work of collaborating artists and associates, as well as personal statements by each co-author.

In accounting for *disorganising*, it is important to begin with acknowledgements. Firstly, we acknowledge the owners and sovereign custodians of the unceded land on which this project was situated, the peoples of the Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung language groups. We extend our respect to their Ancestors and all First Peoples and Elders past, present, and future. To stage *disorganising* on unceded Aboriginal land meant confronting and recognising at every step the destructive ongoing and implicating logics of coloniality, while remaining receptive and ready to take opportunities to demonstrate solidarity and allyship with First Nations collaborators.

disorganising was a fundamentally collaborative project. The public programs and publications were developed and led by Lana Nguyen and Xen Nhà in the roles of Creative Producer and Editor respectively. Other key contributors included *disorganising* team members Georgia Hutchinson (Liquid Architecture), Sebastian Henry-Jones, Tamsen Hopkinson and Leila Doneo Baptist (West Space), and Nina Mulhall (Bus Projects) in addition to Designers Alex Margetic and Zenobia Ahmed, Audio Producer Jon Thija, copy-editor Sarah Gory, and Web Developer Dennis Grauel. The participating artists in *disorganising* included 3CR Thursday Breakfast, Julieta Aranda, Tiyan Baker, Timmah Ball, Torika Bolatagici, Maddee Clark, Fayen d’Evie, Food Art Research Network x School of Instituting Otherwise (Madeleine Collie and Meenakshi Thirukode), Nina M Gibbes, Yasbelle Kerkow, Jacina Leong, Michelle Nguyen, Hoang Tran Nguyen with Tania Cañas and Danny Butt, Play On, Public Assembly, Joel Spring and Carol Que, Ari Tampubolon, and Cher Tan.

This essay, in five parts, sets out to reflect the polyvocal character of *disorganising*, and its resistance to any single unifying account. We begin by outlining the institutional contexts for the project, namely the overlapping crises of 2020 constituted by the simultaneous loss of government funding, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which informed the project’s genesis. In the second section, DISORGANISING KNOWLEDGE, we address local and international activities that can be considered as precedents to *disorganising*. Positioning *disorganising* within a lineage of collective forms of public learning, we argue that the project contributed to the creation of a *living* and *ongoing* knowledge-commons. In the third section, THE DISORGANISING PROJECT (IN VISUAL FORM), we represent *disorganising* as an experimental ecology, mapping the various ways it unfolded in public and private spaces over the course of 2021. This expanded visual and textual map (Figure 1) is intended to reflect the open-ended relationality of the project. The fourth section, titled DIRECTORS’ CUT, comprises a collaboratively authored ‘poem’ of sorts. This text has been assembled from multiple accounts produced during critical writing sessions we undertook throughout *disorganising* as a methodology for reflecting in real time.

The purposes of including it here is both to foreground the fragmentary and experimental nature of the project, and to collectivise a ‘snapshot’ of the personal concerns and conflicts we were experiencing at the time. The final section includes statements from each co-author that establish our positionalities in relation to *disorganising*, both at the time, and from our current perspectives, having all departed from our former roles. Through the prism of these multiple accounts, we tease out some of the challenges we faced in the course of a project committed to questioning inherited structures, values and protocols. These personal statements and reflections,

set against the public statements and published materials that defined the organisations' responses at the time, illustrate some of the tensions between the 'promise' of *disorganising* and the pragmatic realities of its delivery. Ultimately it is the sharing of these tensions that we hope will make a contribution to the themes and concerns of 'public pedagogies'.

Organisational contexts

2020 was not turning out how we, or anyone, expected.

In March 2020, due to the unfolding health emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic, the respective artistic programs of Liquid Architecture, Bus Projects, and West Space were either postponed, or cancelled, with immediate effect, and indefinitely. Along with arts organisations and institutions throughout the country, and much of the world, we were faced with both the logistical disruption of seeing years of planning and investment rendered inoperative, and the emotional disruption, frustration and fallout of lost projects and events central to our sense of community and identity as organisations.

One month later in April 2020, Australia Council for the Arts released the results of a crucial four-year funding round for organisations. For Liquid Architecture and West Space, this continuity of multi-year funding through this program was vital to organisational sustainability, representing the majority of our annual incomes and operational budgets. For Bus Projects, achieving funding through this program was equally crucial for the viability of the organisation, after a number of years of strategic development towards the application. All three organisations were unsuccessful. Along with more than fifty other small-to-medium sized arts organisations throughout the country, that had either been defunded or otherwise unsuccessful, we found ourselves without programs, and in extreme financial precarity.

In a newsletter statement titled 'Liquid Assets, Liquid Horizons', Liquid Architecture quoted from academic and journalist Ben Eltham in *The Guardian*: "There is enough money to fund Australian culture properly ... It's simply a matter of political will" (Eltham, 2020, n.p). The newsletter continued:

In Australia, critically engaged artists and organisations are seen by the federal government as, at best, a harmless indulgence, and, at worst, a threat. The latter became obvious in 2014 when Malcolm Turnbull described artists protesting the Biennale of Sydney's association with offshore detention profiteers Transfield Holdings as "viciously ungrateful". It was obvious in 2015 when George Brandis ripped \$105 million from the Australia Council's budget as punishment for resisting his meddling in their peer-review process. That money was never properly returned. And it's obvious now, when the Morrison government rolled federal arts into a portfolio that also oversees roads and rail. To say they are ambivalent would be generous; they are invested in starving progressive culture in this country (ibid).

All three organisations spent more than 12 months working on their applications to the Australia Council, in its various phases, and years before that building an organisational infrastructure that is now irrevocably compromised. As Liquid Architecture made explicit in their statement,

This was time, labour, and energy that could otherwise have been spent making performances, exhibitions, concerts, talks, essays. So, this funding decision hurts. Not only for us, but for the community of artists, associates, peers, and friends we support, and who support us.

West Space and Bus Projects released statements which similarly outlined the critical stakes and impact of the funding decision combined with the COVID-19 context. West Space's statement, published April 6, 2020, emphasised the effect of funding losses on the small-to-medium sector, stating that "Especially hard hit by the closures, loss of income, and most recently

the redistribution of federal funding, is the small-to-medium sector – organisations that support artists as they are developing their practice."

As these statements, and others at the time, made clear, any organisational response to the defunding would need to account for the multiplying and overlapping impact of COVID-19 and the suspension of exhibition and public programs. As Directors of three respective organisations, we were expected to respond strategically and independently, leading our teams and institutions towards recovery or a reevaluation of priorities. However, before proceeding on the 'path to recovery', the extremeness of the situation produced a sense of needing to take-stock collectively. We convened a series of informal (socially-distanced) meetings in an as-yet-unrenovated space at Collingwood Yards. The industrial reverberant nature of the space was a suggestive backdrop to conversations reflecting on a state of uncertainty, and the possibility of radical responses.

Some key recurring questions informed and shaped these conversations: What did it mean to have our financial models dismantled in the midst of a lockdown and global pandemic? What might we do with operational funding that remained, given the extraordinary circumstances? Might the suspension of normal activity afforded by the pandemic be an opportunity to change how we operated? What would constitute meaningfully experimental artistic practice under these conditions? Going forward, how might we refuse to compete with each other for funding, as we had each done unsuccessfully for the past year?

These, and other questions were extrapolated and discussed throughout May and June 2020. We had the sense of meeting as peers and friends, providing personal support and sharing the bewilderment of difficult circumstances. But we also met as representatives of Bus Projects, West Space, and Liquid Architecture, three Naarm/Melbourne organisations with much common ground; a long history of collaborative programming, shared community, and similar profiles in the Australian arts sector. As such, conversations which began as a means to debrief, quickly evolved into thinking about what our organisations would do next.

Through this dialogue we established a shared imperative: to transform ourselves to survive and adapt to the overlapping crises we found ourselves in. At the heart of these conversations was a loosely-defined proposal to join forces in solidarity and precarity. Concretely, how this would work was unknown, yet we were determined to proceed through experimentation and iteration, and in the process arrive at workable methodologies. Notes from these meetings reflect the idealistic tenor of our speculative plans:

From June 2020, Liquid Architecture, West Space and Bus Projects will think, plan, research, resource, program, fundraise, communicate, and report on our activities as a collective. We will do this for a provisional period of six months, until the end of the year, after which we will reassess. This experiment in organisational solidarity and its outputs will constitute our 2020 artistic programs.

These working notes evidence an inchoate desire to produce a collaborative critique that could inform alternative ways of organising our post-pandemic futures, and a rethinking of the perceived social, political and economic autonomy of our organisations. In October 2020 following a further period of consultation between the three collaborating organisations, a proposal for *disorganising* was submitted and, subsequently, awarded strategic funding from Creative Victoria, through the 'Creative State' program. This program had the specific agenda of reinvigorating the economy during the pandemic, with priority given to applicants that demonstrated the following qualities: 'stabilisation', 'adaptation', 'connectedness', 'resilience', and 'agility' (Creative Victoria, 2021). Whereas other recipients 'future-proofed' their organisations by building new digital infrastructures, undertaking business development, or creating outdoor exhibition venues, the *disorganising* program took a more unconventional route. It utilised the strategic funding to underwrite an experiment in collective institutionalism, born out of a refusal for three peer organisations to remain in competition with each other for dwindling resources. *disorganising* was awarded \$180,000, from a total pool of \$7.9 million provided to applicable organisations (ibid).

In our proposal and public statement we asked: “What would it mean, at a moment of precarity, to become institutionally inseparable?” (*disorganising*, 2020). This proposition was not a ‘pathway to a merger’ or a business plan, it was an exercise in finding new ways of working, grounded in artists and collaboration, and informed by place and site, on stolen Aboriginal land. Whilst *disorganising* met all the aforementioned criteria stipulated by Creative Victoria, it also “responded to the new environment” (Creative Victoria, 2021) of the pandemic by questioning the present and future conditions of creative work.

Disorganising knowledge

The organisations behind *disorganising* brought with them a history of prioritising public knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning in a variety of ways. Through their venues, creative programs and personnel, each organisation represented a concentration of experimental artist-led teaching and learning, and a rich vein of alternative scholarship that forms concentric co-learning feedback loops with diverse participant-publics. As Nick Schuermans et al. state:

Art and other cultural practices are considered to initiate learning processes which differ fundamentally from those generated in the context of formal schooling ... This perspective redirects art research from exploring the meaning ‘embedded’ in art works to consider the sociopolitical processes of learning stimulated by art (2012, p. 5).

This paper contextualises *disorganising* as a means of creating a *living* and *ongoing* knowledge commons. The project emphasises knowledge as a complex ecosystem that is a *commons*—defined as a resource shared by a group of people that is also subject to social dilemmas (Hess & Ostrom, 2007). The knowledge that *disorganising* produced, and continues to generate as a knowledge-archive, was born out of the multifarious artist-led forms that were brought together with the ambition of challenging hegemonies, critiquing power and engaging publics in civil dialogue.

disorganising articulated the ways in which public pedagogy can emerge through a variety of practices, processes and situations beyond formal education. In tracing the history of the usage of the term *public pedagogy* and the confusion surrounding it, Jennifer Sandlin, Michael O’Malley and Jake Burdick (2011) show that historically, education has been acknowledged as occurring both inside and outside traditional school systems. They explain that the earliest usage of the term *public* refers, “not to a physical site of the educational phenomena but rather to an idealised outcome of education activity”, which is ultimately the “production of a public aligned in terms of values and collective identity” (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 342). *disorganising* was conceived as an embrace of the critical, cultural, performative and activist dimension of public pedagogy, further expanding the bounds of teaching, learning and curriculum that have traditionally been presumed inseparable from the institutions of schooling.

In practice, *disorganising* took a conscious political and interventionist approach to emphasise that there is ‘educational work’ to be done in-and-for the public sphere(s). As illustrated in the visual schematic (Figure 1), the multi-strand and overlapping methods employed in *disorganising* produced a new knowledge-commons of jostling ideas, unexpected actions, uncertain conclusions, internal and external critique and reformist recommendations, which emerged out of an open-ended pedagogical environment. While *disorganising* was highly localised in its context and positionalities, the project was also informed by a range of international examples and case studies. One such example is Gudskul, an educational knowledge-sharing platform initiated by three Jakarta-based art collectives, ruangrupa, Serrum and Grafis Huru Hara. From its inception, Gudskul set out to create an ecosystem of artists, designers and creatives, as well as individuals with various other expertise, resulting in a co-managed ‘storehouse’ where all resources are pooled and shared according to collective need (Gudskul, n.d). With this strategy, members are empowered to collaborate on addressing social, political, cultural and economic issues that arise within their constituent communities. Gudskul’s most recent collective study program called Sekolah Temujalar possesses many comparable strategies for knowledge-production and co-

learning to those employed in *disorganising*. Sekolah Temujalar was presented in *documenta fifteen* in Kassel, Germany, and engaged Asia-Pacific art collectives in group experimental learning processes emphasising speculative, practice-led, solution-oriented methods rooted in the tradition of *nongkrong* or *hangout* in Indonesia (Dahl, 2019). This *hangout* approach produced a series of collaborative pedagogical events that armed participants with a wealth of ideas and experiences for long-term organisational sustainability and friendship.

Another example closer to home, is *Collective-Kolektif*, a symposium presented at Collingwood Yards in 2020 — just prior to COVID-19. This event was a direct precursor to the inter-organisational and pedagogical entanglements of *disorganising*. It was presented by Bus Projects and Liquid Architecture in partnership with Project 11, CAST Research group at RMIT University, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at Monash University, and the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Among the collectives that participated were KUNCI Study Forum & Collective, Ace House Collective, OMNI Space, Ruang MES 56 and ruangrupa from Indonesia as well as Melbourne-based this mob, Her Africa Is Real (H.A.I.R.), All Conference, Hyphenated Projects, eleven-collective and Sound School. The purpose of the symposium was to ask: How and why artists work together? What are the conditions required for collectives to thrive? and What is the role of learning and exchange in collectives? The responses revealed a range of political, community-based, artistic and educational approaches to self-organisation. In many ways, this event also reframed the artist-as-educationalist, paving the foundations for the critical knowledge sharing activities that made up *disorganising*. Artists educate and practise public pedagogy by engaging with each other and with audiences in interactive and complex ways, producing what can be described as ‘transitional spaces’:

Public pedagogy emphasises how educators (e.g. artists) cannot merely impose meaning or singular answers upon their educational subjects. Instead, public pedagogy through art is about creating ‘transitional spaces’ where individuals are challenged to face the ambivalences that result from encounters with diversity (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 5).

In other words, artists create complex situations and encounters that, in their unfolding, become profound moments of learning, and this perspective offers a powerful position from which to speculate on the impact of *disorganising* and its immediate and long-term value.

The disorganising project (in visual form)

The attempt to produce an index of *disorganising* outcomes must firstly acknowledge that any such index will remain necessarily incomplete. It is the nature of the project that no single account of *disorganising* will capture its full scope, or the irreducibly subjective experience of those who staged and participated in the project. In summation, some key modes of dissemination for *disorganising* included:

- A series of commissions for new artistic works, texts, events, or performances by 19 Australian and international artists and collectives, which were staged at Collingwood Yards and other venues throughout 2021.
- A publication, the *disorganising* workbook, edited by Xen Nhà, comprising commissioned writing, research and responses to the project produced in an edition of 300 copies and circulated at *disorganising* events and book fairs around Australia.
- A series of co-authored newsletters, published online simultaneously by Liquid Architecture, West Space and Bus Projects, effectively synchronising the messaging of the three organisations across a key channel of communication and public engagement.
- A series of audio podcasts produced by radio-artist Jon Tjhia in collaboration with other contributors, capturing and expanding on different elements of the program.

- An interview series with collectives and artists from Australia and around the world exploring radical organisational models, approaches and critiques, which was subsequently published online in Runway Journal.
- Three disorganising dinners staged at Hope st radio and Collingwood Yards, featuring curated performances, talks, and workshops alongside communal food and drinks, open to members of the general public, local and surrounding communities, and invited guests.
- A series of public workshops exploring different themes including the disorganising potential of composting – led by Jacina Leong, and the collaborative aesthetics of manifesto writing – led by Nina Gibbes.
- A series of printed posters which were pasted on walls around Collingwood by artists including Timmah Ball and Public Assembly.
- A weekly open-access music event staged in the Collingwood Yards courtyard titled ‘Public Practise’ for which musicians of all types were invited to ‘practise in public’.
- A process involving reflection and transcription on the project, facilitated by artist and scribe Leisa Shelton.
- A series of interviews with staff from Liquid Architecture, West Space, and Bus Projects, capturing their thoughts on disorganising, as the project was unfolding, produced by Leila Baptist.

These, and other collectively produced events and initiatives, provided points of public access, invitation and engagement, connecting *disorganising* and its activities with broader publics beyond the participating organisations and artists. As the above list makes clear, many elements of *disorganising* were not only public-facing, but were explicitly concerned with the constitution of provisional or temporary publics through forms of collective play, investigation, teaching and learning.

We are interested in how these events and artistic initiatives articulate a diverse range of approaches to the question of public pedagogy across the breadth of the project. In order to approach this question, and to map the material life of *disorganising*, we have deployed a rhizomatic approach that visually reflects our agenda to ‘disorganise’ and trouble received hierarchies and distinctions between: practices of internal and external organising; the role of organisations, artists, ideas and communities; and ‘private’ and ‘public’ modes of production, circulation and reception.

In the section that follows we have created a ‘map’ (see Figure 1) of *disorganising* using MURAL, a collaborative online tool for designing and representing materials and media in modular form—stressing the relationship of elements to one another, within an overall project ecology. We feel that this form of representation is not only reflective of the experimental structure of *disorganising* — reflected through the dynamic interplay between rigorously planned activities and spontaneous ‘outbursts’ — but also the spirit and atmosphere of the project as it emerged over the course of 2021 under conditions of great uncertainty. This MURAL map and the preceding index, alongside the [project website](#), offers a ‘taste’ of *disorganising* that represents the experimental, messy, and socially engaged experience of those who were directly involved in the project. Click on the image (Figure 1) below to open the interactive PDF.



Figure 1: Schematic of the *disorganising* project using aggregated content from marketing, newsletters, public statements, the project website and documentation by participating creatives. https://bit.ly/Disorganising_Map Image courtesy of Channon Goodwin, Joel Stern and Amelia Wallin.

Directors Cut

Collaborative reflections by Liquid Architecture, Bus Projects and West Space Directors

disorganising seeps between the cracks.

Orienting oneself in relation to other organisations, other people, and other artists. The beauty is in the pluralism.

The magic is also the risk.

Difficulty is a mark of something worth trying.

Holding space outside of normal routines and habits.

Rhetorical force.

Anxiety about whether actions can live up to words.

The feedback loop between internal and external forces speeds up. It kept us talking, kept us meeting.

Group management of atmosphere, atmospherics.

Support structure, mini-lobby.

We're standing on a pontoon but the rapids are raging around us. A spoken narrative that we continually respeak.

Premise, promise, and potential.

How does the beginning flavour the project?

The gladiator system of capitalism and the arts.

We sit in lockdown and time contracts again.

Deep thinking without the essential resource.

Doing less has a cost.

Scarcity as the condition; critical practice as a luxury.

The sum of our parts.

We've stuttered a little, perhaps out of respect.

Pulling apart in order to put back together differently.

Wanting to do more; failing to meet what is already demanded. I don't apologise for this.

We play our role in the ecology.

Backlog of exhaustion.

Future sourdough.

Simplicity of acts.

Permeating how we work.

The curatorial structure of the program.
Disorganising seems too big for this timeframe.
The messy work of collective visioning.
The terms of access to government funding.
Does this situation make disorganising impossible? Acknowledge the work that has been done.
Mandate what we want to keep.
Disregard what we don't.
July is not a finish line.
Reduce the output.
Distil the project.
Dinner at my house, pasta!
I don't need to state this formally.
Who is employed and in power?
Infiltrate the organisations' day-to-day.
What can we implement now?
More reading together, aloud.
More exercises like this. More activities like this.
An hour where everyone has to talk strictly not about work? Between work and non-work.
Refuting the pace of production.
An equipment registry.
Counter the expectation of productivity.
No public outcome at all.
The eight hour work day is no longer relevant.
Quantifying decisions and transactions.
The bureaucracies and institutions we rely on.
We internalise and reproduce their values.
Our ideological commitment to state funding.
The intersection of grass roots, art school, and state funding cultures.
The intersection of language and refusal.

As an arts worker I feel really disembodied.
Sit with it before moving through it.
In the midst of a lockdown.
Suspend other programs.

Cancellation of activities. (Binding or non binding) statements of intent.
See more wildly, not more clearly.
The work needs to be suspended.
Outside of bureaucratic structures.
A poem is something you catch.
The knowledge in the group.
Stolen snippets that are squeezed for every last minute. Rippling out a productive friction.
The imminent public events.
The step by step character.
Sitting at Lynda and Ceri's desk.
More presentational than transformative.
Impossible unless we're all present.
What will happen after 31 July?
Disorganising the rhythm.
Feeling through this unknown space.
Synthesise the values.
Denaturalising the conditions.
Beyond the collective employment of us.
Beyond the projects.
A transformative afterlife.
A collective agreement, a *disorganising* constitution. The organisational habit of being open.

Authors Reflections

Channon Goodwin

The opportunity to write an article from my perspective as an artist working in artist-led bureaucracies is a cathartic combination of confession and advocacy. As I sit down to write this contribution about the complex nature of the *disorganising* project, two organisations that I spent substantial time establishing or running from 2006 to 2021 — Boxcopy and Bus Projects (Bus) — are on the brink of closure or long-term hibernation.

My formative experiences of artist-led organisation-building lie at the heart of my 'great expectations' for *disorganising*, and are the foundation of my belief in the importance of sustainable, small-scale and artist-run organisations. It was the stark realities of the sector I entered after university, plagued by a lack of opportunity, precarity and austerity, that galvanised my commitment to the work that *disorganising* aimed to examine.

The friends I made at Queensland University of Technology in Meanjin/Brisbane became my collaborators in establishing our first exhibition venue, Boxcopy, to address a lack of local exhibition spaces and career opportunities available to recent visual arts graduates. This fledgling endeavour was influenced by the DIY practice we saw embodied by our teachers, particularly the influential artist and educator Mark Webb. Looking back at the shifting-language, programming

methods and aspirations of my organisational work, helps to provide a new perspective on the gap between intention and action in artist-run organisations.

In 2007, we described Boxcopy as an artist-run-initiative that aimed to engage with experimental and innovative artistic practice while supporting young and emerging artists by delivering a program that encouraged critical engagement with a range of mediums, ideas and approaches to art practice. A decade later, under the leadership of Rachael Haynes, Boxcopy had retained many of these original aims, but broadened their scope by becoming not only a ‘space’ but also a ‘platform’ for the experimental and innovative practices of Australian artists at any stage of their careers. In addition, the organisation championed the unique ability of artist-run initiatives to embrace experimentation, collaborative processes and foster DIY approaches to contemporary art practice. As a hefty chunk of our *disorganising* work dealt with the misalignment between our stated aims and intentions, and the actual activity of our organisations, this reflection provides some insight into the evolution of Bus’ organisational language. Taking a step back to explore the influences and circumstances that shaped my involvement in the small-scale sector and the way my practice encounters *disorganising*, it has been insightful to read the work of writer and poet Peter Anderson (2016), who charted the distinct character of Meanjin/Brisbane’s artist-run scene with his extensive policy writing, curatorial work and essays. In his mapping of the scene, he cites Terry Smith’s concept of “infrastructural activism” to draw attention to the diversification of infrastructure for the visual arts, instigated by co-ops, alternative galleries and artist-run venues (Smith in Anderson, 2016, n.p). Through this lens, Anderson champions an expanded view of art practice that treats a wider range of activities as essential components of an artist’s practice, which we can observe in many Australian artists that spent time in Meanjin/Brisbane, such as Robert MacPherson, John Nixon, Peter Cripps, Ian Burn, Mike Parr, Imants Tillers, Tim Johnson and Lyndal Jones. As an artist working in the the Meanjin/Brisbane scene during the expansion of the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) into Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) — alongside a simultaneous downturn in the number of independent and artist-run galleries — Anderson’s championing of expanded forms of art practice greatly influenced how I understand my work as an artist within organisations, and thus as a participant in *disorganising*.

While the emergence of artist-run spaces in Brisbane may be understood as a solution to a lack of access to exhibition opportunities within either the commercial gallery system or the art museum context, it should also be viewed as a part of the development of a new form of organisation within the visual-arts infrastructure, one that is artist-led and essentially democratic or collective in nature. The establishment of the Artworkers Union Queensland, and subsequently the Queensland Artworkers Alliance, is notable in this respect, as many of the artists who took key organisational roles in Brisbane artist-run exhibition spaces were also involved in these activist organisations (Anderson, 2016, n.p).

Inspired by examples of community-organising in music and politics, I have an appetite to become what Canadian cultural critic, artist and curator, Clive Robertson describes as a participatory citizen (2006) by actively engaging in the formation of *policy*. Although policy may sound like an unfriendly term, in the creative context, policy concerns the “managerial and discursive processes that make up the conditions of the production and reception of art” (Conlin, 2008, p. 226). At its core, *disorganising* is an exercise in policy-making and policy-contestation that can give rise to new self-made bureaucracies by and for artists.

Through this narrative tangent, I am sketching out the motivations for my own practice, rooted in my original frustrations with the ephemeral nature of the Meanjin/Brisbane artist-run scene and encouraged by an expanding view of my own artistic practice. This reflective process helps to illustrate why I sought out a role within a committed, long-running, artist-run organisation like Bus Projects in Naarm/Melbourne and why a process like *disorganising* was such a potent provocation.

In 2012, I applied for the role of Gallery Manager at Bus, which was a contractor role of 8-hours per week, located in a transitory venue in the basement of Donkey Wheel House on Bourke Street in Melbourne's CBD. Working in an artist-run organisation with a decade of history behind it was a thrilling prospect not available to me in Meanjin/Brisbane. During its early years, Bus described itself as an artist-run initiative that provided support to local, national and international artists, curators, designers, and sound producers through its annual exhibition calendar, residencies, and performance program, and through various off-site initiatives in public spaces, galleries, venues and events. This language evolved over the subsequent decade and in 2010, just as Bus was about to lose its long term CBD gallery venue to re-development, then Director Tim Webster wrote:

With so much talk over the past couple of years about lack of financial support, rent increases and the occasional imminent closure, it's easy to forget that a place like Bus is made up of people. Spaces like Bus (like every independent artist run project) don't exist because they should, but because of the collective desires of individuals to create and share their work and the work of others. But it's not only about the work. An organisation like Bus is a platform that can be leveraged by practitioners from many fields, who continue to define and refine the role and activity of the group while developing themselves. In this way, Bus is part of an ecology, something that's broader and ongoing (Webster, 2010, n.p).

As I contributed to the gradual rebuild of the organisation from 2012, our language shifted away from its artist-run roots towards emphasising our role as an independent arts organisation dedicated to supporting the critical, conceptual and interdisciplinary practices of Australian artists. This shift away from some of our founding terminology was aligned to our 2013 relocation into a new venue at 25 Rokeby Street, Collingwood, renovated by prominent Melbourne architect, John Wardle. This aspirational cultural hub (with neighbours such as Spacecraft and John Wardle Architects) provided an opportunity for expansion, with three large and two smaller gallery spaces. Our use of more conservative language, and our 'high profile' venue helped to build operational reserves until we secured multi year funding in 2015 from state, local and federal sources which also allowed us to employ two additional artists as staff. As we attempted to position ourselves for six-year funding through Australia Council for the Arts we continued to minimise our artist-run pedigree. This drift in language and operational style may have had more impacts than previously observed—impacts that only came to light for me as part of the collaborative reflective context of *disorganising*.

The sector-wide rupture of funding cuts and pandemic enforced stasis that caused us to realise the importance of positioning ourselves within a cohort of like-minded, artist-centred, organisations came with the "Brandis" raids of 2015, which pulled \$104.8 million out of the Australia Council's budget over four years to create "The National Centre for Excellence in the Arts" fund. This new fund fell under the control of the Arts Minister of the day, then Minister George Brandis. Eltham wrote for ArtsHub at the time:

The biggest losers of the new paradigm will be the small-to-medium sector and independent artists. Because the major performing arts sector remains quarantined from funding cuts, the majority of the pain will fall on smaller companies and artists applying for grants (Eltham, 2015, n.p).

This was an action completely at odds with Brandis's preface to the 2007 publication *Making Space: artist-run initiatives in Victoria* in which he stated:

Artist-run initiatives (ARIs) occupy a crucial role in the Australian visual arts sector. They are a grass-roots network which is particularly important for young and emerging artists. Through ARIs, artists can hone their professional skills in a supportive environment with other artists; share

knowledge, skills and equipment; take advantage of networking opportunities; and display their art in affordable and professional exhibition spaces (Brandis in Heagney, 2007, n.p).

This turmoil and its immediate impact on individual artists and small/micro-scale arts organisations prompted Bus to invest time and funding into inviting artist-run and experimental organisations to help form the network ‘All Conference’ (2016) and work towards our first publication, *Permanent Recession: a handbook on art, labour and circumstance* (Goodwin, 2019). ‘All Conference’ was the first exercise in sector solidarity since the ‘Victorian Initiatives of Artists Network’ in 2004 — a precursor to the focused work of *disorganising* and the foundations of trust and comradeship that this work engendered.

From 2017-2020, Bus began to correct its course and seek a more authentic and ethical artist-run model. While we still talked about providing quality services for artists, we began to understand our obligations to contribute to the development of the arts sector through advocating for the nation's rich artist-run milieu and the importance of small-scale arts organisations. Our relocation to Collingwood Yards in 2020 was the culmination of our strategy to lower operational costs, remove fees previously imposed on exhibiting artists, and employ three part-time artists as staff — including a Gallery Director, Gallery Curator, and Curator of Public Programs. This arch of slow growth away from unsustainable and exploitative practices concluded just as we completed our renovations at Collingwood Yards and the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in full force. At this time, our language shifted again to position the organisation as a dynamic platform for encounters with new art and discourse that support Australian artists, arts writers and arts workers to make and present new work *on their own terms*. We confidently proclaimed the distinct and important legacy of Artist-Run Initiatives in Australia and championed the crucial role they play within the national visual arts ecology. Just as Bus was celebrating being part of an important historical and contemporary movement of artists collectivising to create spaces of agency within broader art systems, we were faced with the double shock of a pandemic and a wave of defunding that impacted the survival of our organisation and that of our neighbours and *disorganising* collaborators.

The long tail of the *disorganising* project is still not fully understood, and the practical changes that have taken place within these three organisations over the course of the project are significant. If there were failures throughout the *disorganising* process, this is part of what *disorganising* was designed to make visible. The heavy lifting that the small-scale arts sector does for the rest of the ecology is never ending and grinding. There are no days off, and the risk of closure is real and ever present. Although there is wealth splashing around at the top of the sector (which trickles down to a lucky few) it is a top-heavy system underpinned by a phoney meritocracy. As a result most creative workers do not earn above the poverty line. This makes for untenable labour conditions. It is no wonder that we three authors write this essay from outside of the organisations that were originally engaged in the *disorganising* project.

To conclude my reflection, during my final year with Bus in 2021 I wrote the following for a grant application:

Bus Projects empowers artists to make new and innovative work public. Historically, initiatives like Bus Projects emerged as a response to the real need to provide exposure for under-represented and emerging artists. Remaining true to this Artist-Run lineage, Bus Projects remains accessible, supportive, and committed to long-term organisational stability and financial resilience. Our integrated program streams enable us to invest in artists to create ambitious new work and encourage an active discourse with art through artist talks, symposia, guest lectures and publishing. Through our open call, peer-assessed, programming model, we provide artists, curators, and writers at diverse career levels with opportunities to present their work in a caring context. Bus Projects’ three artist-staff provide holistic curatorial, technical and marketing support throughout the lifecycle of each project we present.

On the 17th June 2022, with the withdrawal of Creative Victoria multi-year funding, Bus announced its intention to close after 21 years of operation.

Postscript: On the 19th October 2022, Bus Projects declared that they had received strategic project investment funding from the Australia Council for the Arts, making it possible to halt their planned closure and set about planning the next chapter for the organisation.

Joel Stern

I joined Liquid Architecture in 2013, initially as curator, and then as co-Artistic Director with Danni Zuvella, a role I held until April 2022. The organisation had been active since 2000, establishing itself with the benefit of a grant from RMIT Union Arts, as a platform for showcasing work by musicians, sound artists, and new media practitioners primarily associated with the Media Arts program at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT University).

Between 2000 and 2013, alongside modest revenue from ticket sales, Liquid Architecture relied on one-off project funding from various government stakeholders including Australia Council for the Arts, Creative Victoria (earlier Arts Victoria), and City of Melbourne. Despite the contingent nature of this funding, the organisation was able to establish itself as an enduring and important platform for sonic art in Australia. The annual festival structure, with its attendant national touring concert program, allowed for a concentration of resources on fixed outcomes, and a degree of flexibility in terms of scale. During this period Liquid Architecture contracted individual sole traders to deliver festivals, with one-off fees budgeted as a proportion of grant income and revenue.

When I joined Liquid Architecture in 2013, I was offered these terms for delivery of the 2014 festival program. That same year Liquid Architecture received three-years ongoing funding from Australia Council for the Arts and Creative Victoria, which led to a one-year part-time contract—its continuation contingent on ongoing funding. The relative stability of this arrangement enabled the transformation of Liquid Architecture from an annual festival, into a year-round organisation with ongoing staff and a prolific program of activity. This was a period of exponential growth on a number of levels. By 2016 Liquid Architecture had achieved multi-year funding from Australia Council for the Arts, City of Melbourne, Creative Victoria, and City of Yarra, alongside increased revenue, patronage, and co-funding from institutional partners. By 2017 the artistic program incorporated multi-year research investigations, new work commissions, high profile presentations and events in multiple formats, and, from 2019, an inhouse journal, *Disclaimer*. My role was now full-time, and as Artistic Director I worked alongside a full-time Executive Director, and a team of Creative Producers.

At the outset of 2020, Liquid Architecture was operating from a position of strength, reflected in both capacity and the public profile of the organisation. However, the events of March and April 2020, revealed its underlying precarity. I recall the sense of shock and deflation at how easily years of development and work were undone through a combination of external factors. The *disorganising* project was partially an attempt to productively mobilise this shock and deflation towards something new. It was also an attempt to contribute to the conversation about financial sustainability in the Australian arts ecology in a manner that remained true to the experimental and praxis-oriented approach of Liquid Architecture and our peers.

The name *disorganising* came during conversations between Liquid Architecture, Bus Projects, and West Space held at Collingwood Yards in May and June 2020. We agreed that *disorganising* was open enough to multiple readings and interpretations, but nevertheless suggestive of an intention to question organisational orthodoxies and conventions, especially those that foreground independence over interdependence. The name also signalled a recuperation of messiness, disorder, entanglement, and porousness — qualities that are often understood as undesirable in

institutional contexts — as crucial social and political imperatives for the project. This precise sentiment was articulated in the first *disorganising* newsletter, written by Xen Nhà, circulated in July 2021:

The stuff emerges. An excess pours forth, leaving a trail behind. Cleaning up the mess is an action set through repetition over time — it becomes a habit, which then turns into a practice, which then turns into a system, which then turns into an institution. In our first newsletter, we asked, quoting Fred Moten: ‘What if this got to be a mess that the Museum chose to present, rather than clean up? There’s a poetics of the mess, you know? (Nhà, 2021, n.p).

My critical reflection on *disorganising*, with the benefit of hindsight, is that this mess was both a positive and negative force in the project. On the one hand, it stimulated, sustained and unsettled conversations, explorations, and relationships in highly productive ways. This is borne out in what I consider the gloriously tangled web of public projects and outcomes reflected in the map above (Figure 1). At the same time, the messiness of *disorganising* sometimes threatened to overwhelm and undermine the project, with continual uncertainties around process, methodology, responsibilities and roles, timelines, and expectations — in other words, the pragmatic steps necessary to realise the project. In some ways, to be fully immersed in the mess, is to consider its full scope illegible while remaining sensitive to its effects: dissensus, joy, comradeship, celebration, frustration, and a sense of freedom and agency, even if only temporality. In March 2022, after nine years in the role of Artistic Director at Liquid Architecture, I resigned to take up a position at RMIT, as a postdoctoral research fellow. It occurs to me, in retrospect, that *disorganising* was, on a personal level, a form of mental preparation for leaving the organisation with which I had deeply identified over many years.

Amelia Wallin

Writing about my experience of *disorganising* and my tenure as Director of West Space from this position of *after* is challenging. I joined West Space in early 2019, just twelve months before the global pandemic. I held the position until early 2022, before relocating regionally, to Jaara, the land of the Dja Dja Wurrung peoples. My experience of the three years I spent governing West Space, in collaboration with its staff and board, is largely defined by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. Thinking back on the struggles of working, homeschooling, and caring for staff, artists and children, against the backdrop of a global pandemic, I feel a level of disbelief — how? In a sense, everything is now blurred. To adapt a metaphor from *disorganising* collaborator Jacina Leong, *disorganising* is the churning, ceaseless work of composting.

disorganising was of the pandemic. As a project, *disorganising* sought to remain alive to experiences of frustration, sickness, cancelled plans, interrupted schedules, fear, exhaustion and burn out. With the pandemic as both a condition and subject, *disorganising* lumped together the productive and reproductive, the home and the office, childcare and public events. Interrupted by continual lockdowns as well as my own second maternity leave, the mode of *disorganising* was not one of rolling momentum, rather it shuddered along, affected by the moods, capacities, responsibilities and pressures of its participants.

Life gets in the way, which is perhaps precisely the point.

Nine months of disorganising

In the final months of 2020 West Space, Liquid Architecture and Bus Projects were interviewing for the role of Associate Producer and Associate Editor. These two positions were designed to work between the three organisations and were appointed to candidates Lana Nguyen and Xen Nhà in December 2020. Lana and Xen’s creative contribution would become central to *disorganising*. Tasked with moving between three different organisations, they responded, interpreted, articulated and shaped what was originally a series of behind the scenes discussions into a project with multiple invested publics. During their job interviews, I ate almonds ceaselessly.

Whenever I stopped, the nausea of early pregnancy rose up. Almost exactly parallel to the public facing aspect of the *disorganising* project was my own experience of gestation — nine months of production, doubled. On a bodily level there was the reorganising of cells, the growing of a new organ, and on an institutional level we were reorganising artistic programs, re-forecasting budgets, and assembling new staff structures.

Living from work

disorganising was not immune to the creation and continuation of work. Paradoxically, whilst attempting to disorganise, each organisation maintained their own program of exhibitions, performances, and talks. One of the central contradictions of the project is how much work it generated for practitioners who were already overworked and under-resourced, a paradox that was experienced across the sector. As a curator and director of a small arts institution, it was expected that my work would continue, albeit from home. With each lockdown — six in total for Melbourne, totalling 263 days — programs needed to be reshuffled, exhibition schedules re-forecast, and artists and stakeholders notified; all creating the perfect storm of ‘busy work’. Too busy and too tired from the second and third shift to question, why, in the context of a global pandemic, are we still working so much?

While we continue to weather the long *durée* of the pandemic, I recognise the ways in which *disorganising* attempted to undermine the experience of ‘always working’ through practices that included:

- Making time to write through critical writing sessions hosted by Lana Nguyen
- Meetings that made time for sharing and checking in with each other
- Pausing — giving each other and ourselves permission to step away
- Hospitality and nourishment at events
- Composting (to borrow again from Jacina Leong) — adding nothing new, being in duration
- Exploring alternatives to the current conditions of work such as the four day week and cyclical work

My own input in *disorganising* was contradictory. I struggled to find the time to commit to deep practices of critical reflection, and it was a continual challenge to prioritise *disorganising* over other aspects of my work. As Melbourne moved through six lockdowns in 20 months, I felt my time contract and expand with my changing responsibilities and work environments — in particular the closure of childcare and schools, saw my older child pulled in and out of childcare and school at short notice. Childcare was provided at the first few in-person *disorganising* events, and when events moved to zoom, my child participated with me. Despite, or indeed because of the shift in care relations, *disorganising* was one of the few professional experiences I have had that synthesised my paid work with my unpaid work as a mother.

A pregnant pause

In the spring of 2021 a selection of *disorganising* collaborators gathered under the generous green foliage of a plane tree to discuss what to do next. We had awoken that morning to the news that the Black radical feminist bell hooks had died. My colleague Sebastian Henry Jones read a passage from *All About Love* (2000). That day we anticipated learning the outcome of yet another funding round, which would determine staffing and salaries for the coming year. This anticipation extended the mode of uncertainty that had defined the last two years. We did not know whether our positions would still exist next year.

Not quite twelve months since meeting under the plane trees, the directors who initiated *disorganising* have now left our organisations. I feel gratitude to have spent nine months, and beyond, ‘*disorganising*’ even though the outcomes and successes feel elusive. In the short term, the effect of *disorganising* is most evident on a personal level. For the organising participants, it led to a reassessment of our practices of labour, instituting and governance, as evidenced by these critical

reflections from myself, Joel and Channon. At an institutional or policy level, its full effects are yet to be seen.

The risk of *disorganising* was always that the lessons would get lost along the way. I know from countless other examples that maintaining longevity or continuity in the Artist Run sector is a challenge. When there is a turnover of staff, boards, or directors — lessons and learnings can be abandoned in favour of new agendas. How, then, are we to preserve? This act of writing, of public sharing, is one such attempt (Wallin, 2022).

(In)conclusion

In concluding this essay, we hope that, in our idiosyncratic manner, we have reflected the myriad ways in which *disorganising* was conceptualised and subsequently realised — both as speculative platform for ‘organising otherwise’, and as an experimental methodology for producing new forms of collaboration, knowledge and partnership. Through the process of *disorganising*, voices and perspectives from ‘outside’ and ‘in-between’ our organisations were given agency and resources to make bold and transformative proposals. Through our collaborative programs, conversations, and organisational processes, we embraced principles of interdependence, reciprocity and transparency.

At the same time, we remained acutely conscious of the limits for achieving organisational change in an institutional context so contingent on the decisions of funding bodies, professionalised boards, and other infrastructures that curtail the radicality of artist-and-staff led initiatives. In the space of these contradictions and challenges, we endeavoured to practise and research in public, to tease out the complexities of questions pertaining to artists and cultural workers operating in the public sphere(s), and to move against the logics of competitive state funding, the commercial art market, and the increasing privatisation of knowledge symbolised by the neoliberal university. In this sense, the pedagogy of *disorganising* manifested itself as an evolving ‘knowledge commons’ gathered around principles of resource sharing, informed by a desire to collectivise our challenges, and rewards.

Rather than offer a conclusive assessment of the *disorganising*, we hope this essay holds space for a productive (in)conclusion; true to the contradictions, shortfalls, and successes of the project at personal, interpersonal, organisational, and institutional levels. Ultimately, the value of *disorganising* may lie less in the polemical impact of the public statements, or indeed the powerful artworks that shaped many observers' perception of the project, but rather in what can be learned from the struggles, tensions, and contradictions that animated our attempts to disorganise. We believe that the necessity for an essay such as this to exist in the first instance is to make those private tensions matter for the public record, and to stress the pedagogical value of *disorganising* as a repository of knowledge and a material archive, speaking to a desire for change, situated in a moment of historical flux.

Biographies

Channon Goodwin is an artist and artswoker whose work engages with collective, collaborative, and artist-run practice and forms of artist-led organisation building. Channon is the founding Director of Composite, and Convener of All Conference, an organising network of experimental and cross-disciplinary arts organisations from around Australia. From 2012–2021, he was Director of Bus Projects and in 2019, Channon undertook an Australia Council for the Arts International Residency at ACME in London, where he examined the lineages of artists' video and filmmaking cooperatives. He also edited *Permanent Recession: a Handbook on Art, Labour and Circumstance* (2019), published through Onomatopoe Projects. Channon is currently undertaking a PhD at RMIT looking at the working and living conditions of visual artists in Australia and the ways they are attempting to reduce precarity and achieve sustainability in their work through practices rooted in the commons.

Joel Stern is a researcher, curator, and artist living in Naarm/Melbourne, Australia. Informed by his background in DIY and experimental music scenes, Stern's work focuses on how social, political, and technical practices of sound and listening inform and shape our contemporary worlds. In 2013, Stern was appointed Artistic Director of Liquid Architecture, a position which he held until 2022. In this capacity Stern has produced and curated numerous festivals, exhibitions, concerts and publications in Australia and internationally, while developing artistic research investigations and programs including Eavesdropping, Machine Listening, Polyphonic Social, Why Listen?, Instrument Builders Project, and Ritual Community Music. Stern's PhD thesis *Eavesdropping: The Politics, Ethics, and Art of Listening* was completed in 2020 through the Curatorial Practice program at Monash University. In March 2022, Stern stepped down as Artistic Director of Liquid Architecture to begin a Vice-Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellowship at RMIT School of Media and Communication.

Amelia Wallin is a curator and writer, living on Dja Dja Wurrung land. Her foundational training in performance has informed her curatorial practice through an interest in site, duration, audience and archive. As a curator she has conceived and delivered large-scale commissions for multidisciplinary art centres, biennales, and independent spaces across Australia and the USA. Amelia is currently curator at La Trobe Art Institute, where she works with artists, curators, designers, writers and the University's collections. She was formerly Director of West Space, where she led the organisation's move to Collingwood Yards, and initiated innovative cross-organisational programming including *disorganising* (with Liquid Architecture and Bus Projects) and The Region (with RMIT, Para Site, Western Front and Enjoy Contemporary). Amelia worked with Performa as the inaugural Curatorial Fellow and has been involved in leading multiple artist run initiatives. She is a current PhD candidate at Monash University.

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