

Setting up an artist led space

Introduction

Artist-run spaces can be useful for professional artists to expand their careers, make new networks, or simply to organise exhibitions for themselves and their friends. Running your own gallery can offer huge rewards both in your professional and personal life, offering exhibition and research project opportunities and gaining a better idea of the nature of art markets, whether financial or social. But an artist-led space is much more than simply a gallery, or an opportunity to be in more shows. This guide seeks to demystify the process of setting up an artist-led space and provides issues to consider before taking such a step.

Organisational structure

Before you begin it is important to consider the responsibilities and time involved in setting up and running an artist-led space. Marketing, administration, perhaps a website and negotiating with landlords takes up as much – or more – time than putting together a show. Sometimes a one-off exhibition or project is desired, making the process of setting up a space shorter but no less complex or intense. You may consider collaborating with other artists to share the workload; it is a good idea to have a written agreement stating each person's responsibilities before you start. For a smaller or one-off project, or in the initial stages of many artist-led spaces, a simple written agreement between collaborators is often enough. Later on, however, a more formal structure may be appropriate, and there is information about the different types of organisation on [the Artquest Q&A legal advice website <http://www.artquest.org.uk/qanda/articles/forming-an-organisation.htm>] as well as on [the Charity Commission website <http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/>] about these types of collaborations. Some forms of organisation will preclude the need to pay business rates, but getting charitable status is a lengthy and potentially expensive process. Newly created [Community Interest Companies <http://www.cicregulator.gov.uk/>] are an easier structure to set up, and if you are considering charitable status you may consider this instead.

Finding a venue

The type of venues you use will depend on the programme you intend to offer and the types of project you are interested in. Your local council can be an excellent first step in finding a venue – many local borough arts officers can provide a list of vacant council properties, some of which may be available at reduced rents or free for limited periods of time. Many private property owners understand the regenerative potential of the visual arts and could be persuaded to provide a space at a low price, or free for a period. Many artist-led spaces have used domestic venues (such as [Apartment in Manchester

<http://apartmentmanchester.blogspot.com/>] and Switchspace in Glasgow, co-curated by [Sorcha Dallas <http://www.sorchadallas.com/>] who now runs her own commercial gallery) and this can be an excellent way to test the water before making a larger commitment of time and money. Other groups may elect to use different spaces for each of their exhibitions or projects, such as [Cuckoo in New Zealand <http://www.cuckoo.org.nz/>] or Reclamation Artists in Boston, USA, meaning the early stage of the organisation can avoid the difficulties and extra workload a permanent space can bring.

Funding

As well as the obvious costs of rent and exhibition costs, you may also need to consider business rates if you are in a commercial property, commissions costs and exhibition fees for artists – perhaps even trying to pay yourself. Many artist-led spaces fund part of their costs by letting sections of their properties to artists for studio space, such as 1000000mph in London. At the very least, a good aim is to have the space pay for itself, and many spaces will ask for donations from artists to fund their show, or help them with applications for project funding. You can apply for project funding (not for running costs) from [Arts Council England <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/>], but their recent budget cuts of 35% plus a cap on regularly funded organisations makes this increasingly difficult.

Support in kind

In general, it is easier to try getting goods and services for free or reduced prices than cash from businesses, which may be interested in sponsoring parts of your programme, especially education programmes. Businesses can be persuaded to provide catering or alcohol for private views, printing for invitations, distribution through their outlets or even paints and other materials used when installing exhibitions – try to meet people in the businesses who can help and talk to them about what you are trying to do and, crucially, the benefit to them. Your local council may also be of financial assistance, or might write letters of support on your behalf for funding or support in kind applications. You may agree with exhibiting artists that sales will attract a commission, but depending on the work you show this can be impossible. It is important to plan budgets very carefully to avoid financial difficulties for which you may be personally liable, depending on the kind of organisation you set up.

Marketing

Your marketing is in many ways the lifeblood of your space. Any sponsorship or funding will be easier to obtain if you have a proven profile and documented successes. Initially, use your personal network of contacts to spread the word, including in advance of the space opening up. Email invitations, although cheap and easy to use, get lost very easily in increasingly full inboxes, so if you are planning to use them make sure they are memorable and easy to use.

Your curatorial policy and the projects you are planning are all part of your 'brand', which can be entrenched with the graphic and type styles you use.

Legal

There are a number of legal considerations when opening any space into which members of the public are invited. Public liability insurance will help protect you from legal claims should there be an injury or accident, and contracts or letters of agreement are vital to avoid misunderstandings and later legal costs. Prevention is easier – and cheaper – than potentially very costly litigation. Sample contracts for exhibiting artists, sales, property, loans and commissions can be found in [the Artlaw Archive <http://www.artquest.org.uk/artlaw/contracts/28188.htm>] by art legal specialist Henry Lydiate. The [Society for All Artists <http://www.saa.co.uk/>] provides insurance for exhibitions for its members and public liability insurance for Gold members.

Programme

Although your venue and marketing will have an impact on the number of visitors and potential funding, your curatorial policy and aims will ensure success. Consider the type of work you want to show and have a short, written statement on your website or marketing publicity explaining what it is. This is important to emphasise to your visitors what they can expect, and will help your space to stand out. You may also consider networking or educational strands to your programme, but bear in mind the extra time this takes up and be honest with yourself about what workload you can handle.

About the Author

Russell Martin is an artist and writer based in London. He ran the artist-led project space [HÔTEL BELLVILLE <http://www.hotelbellville.org.uk/>] with artist Robin Kirsten from February 2003 to April 2004 in a disused shop space in Waterloo, London. Information on current projects can be found at <http://www.russellmartin.org.uk/>.

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