

Selina Foote and John Ward Knox in dialogue

JWK – Hey Selina, what do you think of having an email conversation about Newcall, which we then print as NC's contribution?

SF - That sounds good and easy to do. I was a little awkward at the meeting. I'm happy to contribute as much as you want. But I appreciate that this is your baby and you have invested a lot of energy and thought to matters 3. However because you have commitments with Chris I'm also happy to take any pressure off you that I can.

JWK - Ok. I'd be glad for your contribution.

Can you start off by telling me your position on how you came to be involved in the Newcall venture, and maybe expand specifically on the points most pertinent to your needs/desires at the time? I'm thinking that we write fully and expand on points of interest so that this can serve as a document for M3, with the knowledge this is likely to be our contribution. But no need to make it pretty, just 'cos people will read it! Hah.

Then I will expand upon your response and we will go from there. Needs to be done and dusted by the first of September though.

Cool?

SF - Cool I'll send something through in a day or so.

JWK - Cool. The sooner the better though

SF - Hi John,

Hope you're good.

Tone is a bit of a stab in the dark. Let me know your thoughts. It's a bit of a casserole so feel free to pick it apart.

There is something about summer that encourages ideas. Things feel optimistic and realistic. It allows for ideas which perhaps at another time of year, in a different climate, would seem unreasonable. Adults in shorts. Bare feet. Outdoor meals. Things that allow for or perhaps spur on conversations about grand ideas. Newcall was conceived in these early days of summer.

Collectively we agreed that there was a space missing in Auckland to see contemporary art, to talk about it, read about it and think about it. We felt a need for a challenging space. Somewhere that presented physical challenges. I wanted somewhere that showed work outside of a domestic sized space. One that presented the challenge of exhibiting domestic sized work in a museum sized space, perhaps. One that removed structural intimacy and relied on the work to create its own space. Or alternatively a space that allowed for monumental work. A space, that if the work wanted it to, would take it all seriously.

These were just ideas. We had ideas of the constant movement and re-establishment of a space. One that would refresh itself and reinvent itself with each show. It became evident that we wanted to create something not limited to a space. Something, that established a different tone from other spaces but with a shared aesthetic. Something, that encouraged rigorous conversation around young artists' work. Something, that moved away from the institutional methods of presentation and review. Something, that was not a comfortable or settled arrangement. One, that would remain fluid, that had the ability to adjust and restructure itself. And importantly, something that sat apart, denied itself the role of a 'stepping stone'.

best selina.

ps. john, I saw your show. It's really beautiful.

JWK - Hey Seli.

That's a very pretty casserole. Kind of like it has been made of mint and lavender. And though I am very fond of flowery analogy and all that, maybe we are giving ourselves too much credit, as having more knowledge when we started than we actually did..

For a start, I'd say that one of the biggest incentives for the creation of a space wasn't our perceived lack of critical venues (I mean, we had Gambia and ACFA doing really great critical things) but that we wanted to create a space for ourselves in an art world that would not assimilate us straight out of art school. This was my second time finishing art school, so I had experienced the post 4th year blues, emerging out of the convenience and luxury of a system that allows and encourages you in your slightest quirk. I don't think we could really have accurately perceived a gap in the critical arena, because none of us was involved to the extent that we were aware of every thing happening every where.

I think what we were doing was going contrary to the conventional model of supply following demand. We created excess supply, by creating this new avenue (Newcall) and then slowly this avenue integrated itself into the stream of demand. Y'know, people were only just interested in the space when it first started, and I think that maybe that is natural with new spaces, but there certainly wasn't any audible sigh of relief from the art community at large when we opened (at least that I could hear..). What we did which was really quite good though, was to prepare our space well. Those months of renovations really paid off as we were able to let the architecture do a big chunk of the work for us.

It's funny though, because like you say, we were interested in having an entity that wasn't determined by the space, that was ideas driven, but we kind of ended up with the opposite. I remember I came up with the dorky idea of calling the thing a mobius-space, one where the outside and the inside were blended in a continuous line. Very M.C Escher... So that there was continuity between the experience of the gallery and the surroundings.. And now people have to buzz to be let in. Ha! Well ideas change.

Also, there was the palaver with the names. We went through all sorts of different things, flowery vagaries, rigid acronyms, one-word statements, most of which reminded me of those horrible stores like 'nest' or 'malt' (though I admit, I still like '*buildings*'... I'd still call a gallery building, or buildings). Then we settled on the name of the site. So we kind of

let the space do the talking for us, on a lot of things.

I also think that a lot of what you write is from the luxury of our current standpoint. We didn't know what we were getting into. A lot of the things we did were very definitely in line with the model of an artist-run-space as stepping stone to professional career in the 'real' art world. I don't think we did these things intentionally, but it is much harder to bother to build your own ladder when you can see one already there, within your reach, if you catch my drift. I think we have been trying to wean ourselves away from this approach, but it can be slow going. It has to be said also, that sometimes we were not helped by the attitudes artists brought with them into the space. We have seen some pretty bad shows at Newcall, ones that could be replicated in any dealer gallery and not feel out of place. Don't get me wrong, I like dealer shows, but what we offer is something really quite big. A big, clean space, where you can do anything. Maybe it is naive of me to expect that people not make domestic sized artworks and install them as if they were each an individual gem to be purchased, but really it seems that the space is being used as if there were an ultimate end of salability to individual works.

I think that we are seeing the floor used like a pedestal, when an object is placed there, it is respectfully proportioned to the other objects in the room, and you can move around it and admire it from all angles. Similarly with the walls. But that's just a pet gripe. There have been moments when the artists showing have really succeeded too, Sean Kerr's show was a cracker and I really liked the benches of Sean Grattan's recent show, especially with the interlude video. I think these shows didn't respect the gallery as a "gallery" per se and I think that it'd be good to see more projects have the guts to do this. But then I also think that it is kind of dumb to think about guts.

What do you think about the shows we have had? You and I are very different artists so I assume we have differing outlooks.

Could you talk about some of the problems we have faced that you are aware of?

best
John

SF - Hi john,

sorry it's late. esquires' internet was down .

Yes. I remember when talking about creating a space, we were all too aware of the other artist run spaces in Auckland and how they operate. We did agree that there should be a point of difference with Newcall. And I think that this changed from the idea of being a portable space, to one that would attempt to be more rigorous with its criticality. I remember one of the first things we laid down at the start of Newcall was that all shows should be accompanied by a text and a talk that would encourage critical engagement. I remember also discussing our dissatisfaction with critical responses to artworks in Auckland, being too meek, and how we might stir things up a bit. But that's perhaps all too ambitious.

There is an interesting trend that you mention John, with the dealer-esque style of shows that have appeared at Newcall. I think part of the lure for artists to make such shows is that we have a big, clean space. I remember wanting to have a gallery space that was

essentially bare, with none of the wallpaper, carpet and fixtures that regularly occupy artist-run spaces. Part of this was me thinking about my paintings in an ideal space. And white walls and a clean open space do appeal, though I am well aware of the likeness to a dealer space. The problem of painting being read in a commodity sense is an ongoing nag. There is always the fear that work will be dismissed by an audience because of this. Particularly with small, domestic sized paintings.

One thing that is problematic with the shows at Newcall, which has come up in recent conversations, is the role of artist as curator. Newcall is a big space to take on. Particularly as a lot of our artists that we have shown are fresh from the small exhibition spaces of art school, or other artist run spaces. The solo show also brings its own problems. There are a lot of difficulties which arise from artists installing and curating shows of their own work. There is a preciousness to the work that comes across in some shows, as you say treating the work like 'gems'.

It was also interesting to note that as Newcall got more shows under its belt, the more our aesthetic became defined, though not deliberately so. And often artists work began to change to fit into this aesthetic that Newcall had independently created for itself. My favorite shows were Marnie and Martin's show, 'Blue as Silver as Gold' with you, Patrick and Sasha and Sam's painting show. The first two, because they both used the space in a way that it hasn't otherwise so successfully been used. Both shows also had a really nice balance, the work was cleanly placed in the gallery but not precious, the fact that people could walk through your work, though often not on purpose, said something of this. I also liked Sam's because it was a really exciting painting show. And there never seem to be many all-painting shows around. This highlights one of the biggest problems at Newcall for me. And perhaps one that we spend a great deal of time addressing – how can we show work that gets us excited? Of course our audience extends beyond the collective, but that seems to be the first step. To get us excited about the work.

JWK - Yeah that energy thing is a big problem. I think that problem may be endemic to art in general a bit though too. Art can be so bloody boring. I know there are no hard and fast rules about caliber of art practices, but I do think that more often than not, the most exciting artworks are ones that relate to larger spheres of interaction and discourse than purely art-related ones. Of course I'm not advocating some goofy relational thing, but I do think we have had a lot of 'art' art exhibitions. They have probably been good 'art' art, but their brand of affect is limited to the small sphere of interaction of a gallery. You generally have to premeditate a position of generosity or leniency before entering an art gallery I think. It takes a certain amount of generosity of thought to consider somebody's abstraction of value as a potential lesson. You really have to humble yourself if you want to experience art as a catalyst of emotion/information/value.

Does that make sense?

What I am trying to say is that so often you have to be heavily invested in art already to be able to get anything back from it, because the nuances and specifics that separate a great show from a naff one are often ones that are only recognisable by those who are already familiar with the specialist nature of the language.

I liked Martyn and Marnie's show too. I think it should maybe have been a Martyn solo though. That was our inexperience again. That work was so good. It was like Kate

Newby's wonderful Gambia show, where the relationship between you and the object was just not argued. With Martyn's, the billboard was billboard sized. Simple. With Kate's the division was kind of akin to a full sized and overblown golden section of the gallery, where you inhabited the golden 5/16ths or whatever it is in a perfectly believable haze. These were great shows because you could never be bigger than the art. Maybe that's a simplistic view but it certainly applies to the potential of the Newcall space. You can dwarf yourself in it in a way that you can't if you are constrained by the fact that the things on display have to go into somebody's home. Lets invite Martyn to have another. He has this awesome wall sculpture/furniture thing made out of wood that he was planning for Wellington that didn't go ahead. But back to the point.

I don't have a problem with paintings or small-scale things in the space though, so long as they are purposefully produced or purposefully displayed. When things just sit there like sad little chickens is when it starts to get problematic.

Something that *is* really exciting is the new Newcall Publishing venture. It is really exciting. Hopefully Matters is something that will keep going. Do you know if anyone has put their name forward to be the editor of Matters 4?

I think there is one really important thing to acknowledge with a mind to what Newcall can do for others (aside from the product we provide in the way of exhibitions, talks and texts), and that is to serve as an example. Not in the top down kind of way, but in the way that we really didn't know quite what we were getting ourselves in for and that we kind of couldn't have done it without that naiveté, or at least, maybe we *wouldn't* have done it had we known how much work it would be. I think unless you are working a bit too hard you are not working hard enough, and often, naiveté is the only way you will undertake something that has the potential to exceed you. I think Newcall has been a really great learning curve for all of us, with the added difference that we are learning our lessons in public.

I think learning in public, so long as you learn the right lessons when they come is a commendable thing to do, otherwise you are not open to those chance things which can provide the essential material to a meaningful project. Artist-run-spaces are kind of an avenue for learning in public, generally, and I think sometimes people treat them as repositories for answers and not questions, which kind of defeats the purpose in my eyes.

448 was really great when it was around. There were heaps of mistakes there, but really good ones. The new RM is really exciting too. Maybe we need to open ourselves up to a bit more risk again?

SF - Yeah I think that's it in a nutshell. We need to take more risks. But not just us, the shows that get proposed need to take more risks. It seems a little like people at times, approach a show at Newcall as one that will get them into a gallery, or at least been seen by people who can make that happen. Which explains why so much art seems to have that aesthetic, scale etc. And with that logic why artists may play things safe.

We've had shows that perhaps didn't best use the space and ones that were a bit dry but none that any of us would really call a fuck up. Which means either all risks were pulled

off successfully or we didn't take any.

sorry I'm on a half hour lunch break trying to eat a sandwich (which I had to pick mould off) as I write this so it will have to be brief plus I overslept my alarm by an hour and a half this morning, which is why, this wasn't done before work.

Any way, I think with Newcall, Acfa, gambia castle, 488, Rm, there is a really great sense of optimism and energy. And it's great that Auckland, small as it is, has the ability to support this niche community. There is always a question of longevity, but that perhaps will be addressed when things come to their natural end.

time to go,
best,
selina