

## Tear down the theatres, build up the artists

### PREMIUM CONTENT

EMMA CLARK GRATTON

'Anywhere art' is now so widespread that the need for purpose-built galleries and theatres is being questioned.



*The Gremlins perform at the 2016 Anywhere Festival*

You can exhibit paintings in a cafe, play music in a church, perform in a park, make art for audiences in private homes, factories, shopping centres or corporate office space. Art can be anywhere so why do we still need theatres and galleries?

We don't, Anywhere Theatre Festival director Paul Osuch believes. 'The biggest trick that the custom built theatres have performed is to convince people that a specific custom space is required for a performance,' said Osuch.

Now in its sixth year, the Anywhere Festival co-opts venues across the state for performance. 'Venues do this because they realise that theatre can exist without theatres but theatres can't exist without theatre, so they've tried to say "excellent theatre" happens in proper theatres as a way of creating a necessity to use their venues. They've created an infrastructure and a cartel and voila! Here we are.'

Osuch rejects the idea that performances outside of traditional theatres are somehow surprising or unique. 'This whole idea really gets my goat because if you've got some walls you can put up some art and invite people in. If you have a space of any type it can be performed in. You don't need custom built spaces,' he said.

The Anywhere Festival is part of a widespread move that brings art out of institutional spaces. Much of the push is logistical. Systemic funding cuts across the industry have left fledgling arts organisations scrambling to find affordable places to show work, looking outside theatres and galleries because they can't afford to get in.

At the same time theatres and galleries are becoming entrepreneurial producers of work rather than merely venues, recognising that providing a space is no longer enough.

**Read: [Why it always feels like festival season](http://www.artshub.com.au/festival/news-article/features/festivals/richard-watts/why-it-always-feels-like-the-festive-season-252944)** (<http://www.artshub.com.au/festival/news-article/features/festivals/richard-watts/why-it-always-feels-like-the-festive-season-252944>)



*Gin and Sin Salon in a private residence, 2016 Anywhere Theatre Festival*

### NECESSITY'S CHILD

For emerging artists, using alternative spaces to show work is often born out of a lack of access to traditional gallery spaces.

While Kiera Brew Kurec was a student at the Victorian College of the Arts, she ran two series of shows in a small, unused lockable window near the school. 'The artists I chose to show were friends from the university and overseas. The small scale allowed for artists to post work for a cheap cost.'

'Artist-run spaces in Melbourne are expensive – and competitive – and they also can represent only a small sector of the arts community. Creating spaces for yourself and others to show work allows for new audiences, as well as the opportunity for artists to show who may not fit the model of artist-run and commercial spaces.'

But if holding an exhibition or performance in an alternative space is often born of necessity, it also becomes a statement on the way the artwork interacts with the space. Conceptually, positioning art outside of a gallery or theatre demands that the viewer experiences the artwork in a different way to art shown in the traditional confines. The space becomes an integral part of the artwork.

'Using non-traditional spaces also creates the possibility for artists who create site specific works to engage with different environments,' said Brew Kurec. 'We often separate art from our day-to-day lives and put it in a sterile gallery, often only to be visited and viewed by a small community of other artists.'

'I think it's interesting if we start experiencing art in spaces that we are actually more familiar with, such as the home, a park or a workplace, as these are some of the spaces which frame the conversations our work often discusses.'

**Read: [10 new rules for public art](http://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/visual-arts/deborah-stone/10-new-rules-for-public-art-252252)** (<http://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/visual-arts/deborah-stone/10-new-rules-for-public-art-252252>)

### THE DEATH OF THE VENUE

Osuch believes the success of work outside traditional venues begs the question of whether theatres and galleries still have a role.

'If custom built theatres are difficult logistically and financially for independent artists to create work in, then you have to wonder about their purpose beyond continuing their own existence,' said Osuch.

'There was a fascinating (and potentially theatre closing) experiment performed over two years in a 200 seat Polish theatre with an annual season. The first year, they curated a season of works around a theme and according to what the artists found was good, and then in the second year they simply picked random shows instead with no restrictions. The overall critical and audience response to each season overall was pretty much the same.'

'So I think people present performance in unusual places for logistical and creative reasons and with a few little tweaks to state and federal legislation we'd see many more "non-traditional" spaces being provided, more artists presenting work, more audiences experiencing theatre and that becoming part of every community instead of something that happens in that little black box building that most people don't go into most of the time.'

He believes that investment in venues would be better transferred to investment in creators. 'Tear down the theatres and build up the artists instead.'

**Read: [34 opportunities in the arts to kickstart 2017](http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/grants-and-funding/brooke-boland/34-opportunities-in-the-arts-to-kickstart-2017-252928)** (<http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/grants-and-funding/brooke-boland/34-opportunities-in-the-arts-to-kickstart-2017-252928>)

### A DIFFERENT AUDIENCE

Bringing art out of the galleries and theatres and into streets, living rooms and public spaces makes it approachable and accessible for a new audience who may never visit a gallery or theatre.

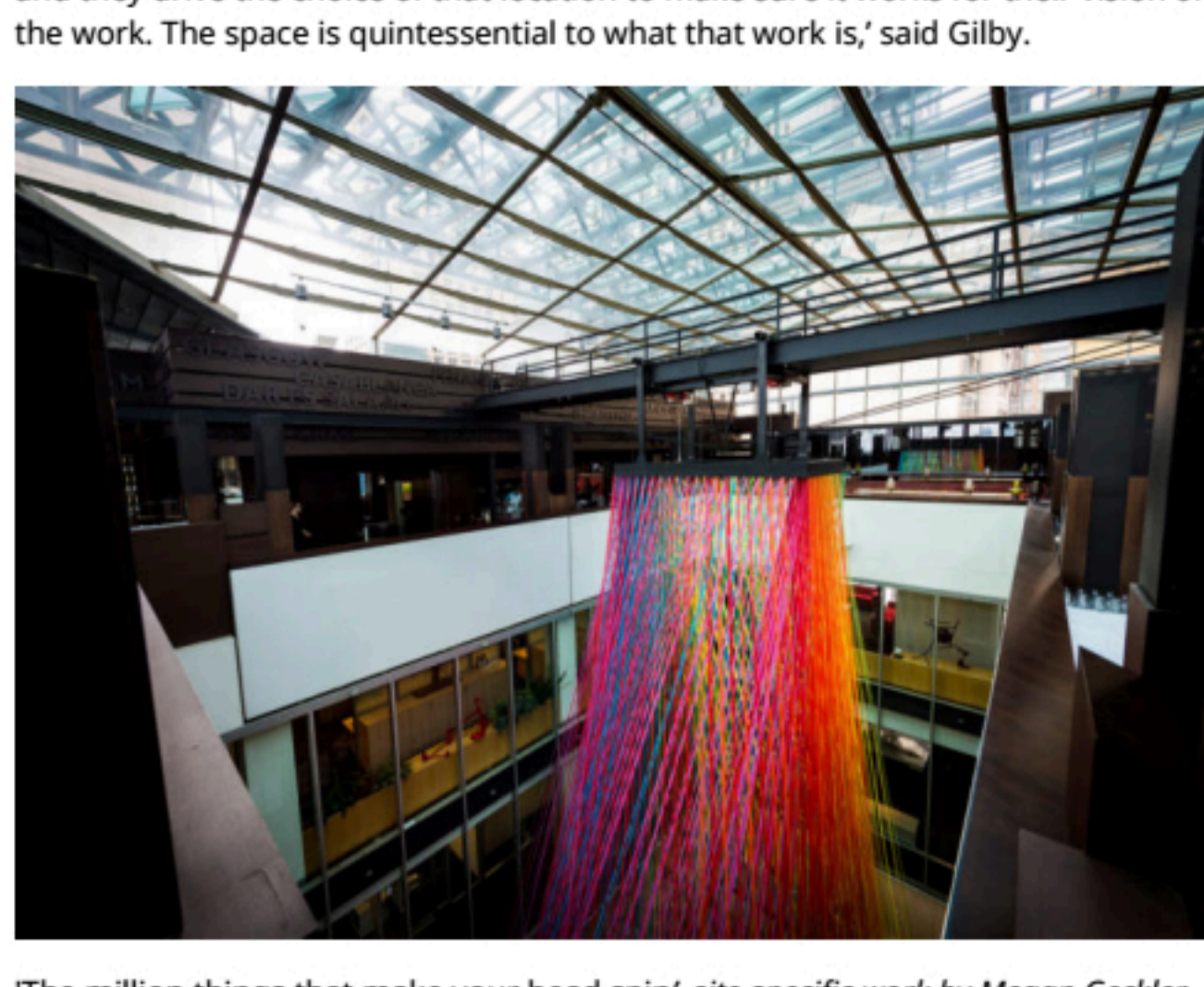
'It puts the work in the context of the world in which you live, instead of being something that happens in a sterile environment. It's the difference between going on a snorkelling trip on the Great Barrier Reef, seeing the effects of bleaching and being in a place to take that into your life and do something as opposed to watching an affecting documentary about the same thing in a cinema and then coming out of the dark space into the light and thinking "So, where should we go eat?"' said Osuch.

Local governments are increasingly interested in investing in art that brings people onto the streets and activates commercial spaces.

Stephen Gilby, creative director of the City of Sydney's Art and About program sees the advantages of catching audiences off guard. 'We are putting art in places where you don't expect it. You'd expect to see it in a gallery or in a

museum, while we are putting in somewhere where people are surprised by it, and they take the time to look at their city in a different way. We can attract different audiences who might not have otherwise seen the work.'

Because the location of the artwork is such an important part of the piece, Art and About works closely with the artist to decide where the works go. 'For us, it's important that the artist is really closely involved in the choice of the location, and they drive the choice of that location to make sure it works for their vision of the work. The space is quintessential to what that work is,' said Gilby.



*'The million things that make your head spin', site-specific work by Megan Geckler at Customs House, 2016-17. Image by Jessica Lindsay*

Artworks and performances shown outside of traditional spaces are often temporary, which allows the work to reach a wider audience and creates a layer of transient and dynamic culture on a place.

'All our works are temporary, which gives us the freedom to work with more artists and different spaces throughout the city, and expose the work to whole new audiences all the time.'

Art and About currently has an artwork called 'The million things that make your head spin' by American artist Megan Geckler at Customs House. It involves 14 kilometres of plastic flagging tape stapled web-like to the atrium. The work was built in the site and created after Geckler visited the space. 'The work is absolutely responding to that space. There is a model of the city of Sydney in the floor of Customs House, and most people come in and look at the floor. And this artwork is encouraging them to look up at the space above them.'

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