

Watt's the Point ?

Q & A

Watt Space only exists due to the people who have spent countless hours setting it up, running it and maintaining it over the past twenty years. We asked five of these people, **Jacquie Henderson** (student founder and inaugural Watt Space Committee member 1989 - 1990), **Penny Finnigan** (former student Watt Space Committee Member 1992 - 1993 and Director 1997-1999), **Ross Woodrow** (Past Watt Space Committee member 1990-2000), **Ashley Whamond** (former student and Watt Space Committee Member 2001) and **Claire Parker** (student and current Watt Space Committee member) to take a light-hearted look at their time at Watt Space.

What was your role at Watt Space?

Penny: I was President of the Watt Space committee for three years as a student and was on the committee when we chose the new premises at University House. I was Director of Watt Space from 1997 – 1999, when we celebrated the tenth anniversary with the Watt Decade show, which I also curated.

Ross: I became the Chair of the informal Gallery Committee in 1989 and assisted with the setting up of the space and all associated issues such as name, logo, opening times and selection processes.

Jacquie: I was one of the founders. It was a very hard and long road to get it off the ground. Those were the days when Student Union membership was compulsory and there was an inequitable amount of the membership dues given over to other student bodies, particularly the sporting ones. They were the most vocal and visible around the campus, even getting their trips to Hawaii for sporting events. That changed when a few of us decided that the Arts Faculty needed a bite of the cherry. We protested, even to the extent of closing off the roads into the uni, blockading all traffic coming in. We became very political, calling on all representatives and we lobbied like crazy. We held very large meetings within the uni and demanded to have some of the funds redirected to meet the needs of our members within the Arts area. Once the Union board realised we were becoming a force to be reckoned with, they sat down and listened to our requests. There were three of us, myself, George Drewery and Brian Bulley, who worked out the logistics of starting a gallery where art students could exhibit their work and develop curatorial skills.

We were given a very small budget and had one week to find suitable premises. We found this little space in Watt Street that I think, from memory, cost around \$100 per week.

Penny: The fact that Watt Space still exists in its current form rests with those first students, a member of the Fine Art staff, Ross Woodrow and a little later, directors, who fought battles that you probably can't conceive of. The Art School had just joined the uni – an unwelcome addition for many. SRC funding had always been allocated to the sport type clubs and controlled by a select few, and it was only by threats of audits that the first champions of the Gallery, George Drewery, Jacquie Henderson, and Bryan Bulley supported by Ross Woodrow were able to secure support – the idea that an 'approach' led in a seamless way to the establishment of the gallery could not be further from the truth. These students and the ones who immediately followed did not just form part of the committee, but sought positions on the Union board to influence decisions about the gallery – on one occasion election results were held up because the committee convinced the fine art students to come out in force to vote their candidates onto the board, unheard of, it held up the count by a week.

Ashley: I think I was Secretary, but I could have been Treasurer... Secretary is most likely though, in 2001.

Claire: After several years as a student exhibitor at Watt Space I decided to run for the committee. Watt Space provides a unique opportunity for students to experience the running of a virtually commercial gallery.

2. What was the most memorable thing that occurred during your time at Watt Space?

Penny: As a student, when Pippa actually got an office instead of operating out of a suitcase ! Pippa's role as first Director as she developed and filled it was an amazing thing to watch – I was a student at the time of her appointment; having no office, she was like a bag lady trekking through the studios making contact with students, setting up the whole infrastructure of how the programs would work from scratch out of a suitcase. Having provided financial support, the Faculty and Union were pretty reluctant to provide anything else, so we thought we were lucky when an office made of temporary screen walls was set up in the Fine Art Building. It was soon declared an OH& S risk (and was), but for that moment in time Pippa finally had access to a phone – she had to go into the Head of School's office to use it, quite an imposition. These were the days before mobile phones and laptops – try to imagine how it would have been. After that she was pushed into a spot in the gym that the students couldn't find. Eventually through much pressure and politicking, after some five years, she was finally given the office the Director occupies now; we were overjoyed but even then we shared a photocopier, were told off regularly for using too much paper, or else accused of stealing it. We walked on eggshells constantly. There are a million stories, I guess now only of interest to those who were there, but it was amazing to be involved and to help create this living thing. A further milestone was the introduction by the Union of the student assistant at Watt Space, certainly a measure of their increased support and recognition of the Gallery, and of the workload of the Director.

Another memorable moment was as Director, the move to University House. The students on the committee who visited Nesca House with John Broughton, manager of the University of Newcastle Union, were me (I was Penny Metham then) Peter Barnes and Belinda Cheung, along with Pippa, Ross and Union representatives. John Broughton was disbelieving when we spurned the front foyer space, thinking the marble halls in that space were perfect. The further exploration and discovery of the areas that make up the Gallery now was only reluctantly agreed to. It was dim, dirty and completely filled with rubbish, he thought we were mad.

Ross: What were the memorable moments? – Naturally the Xmas parties were a highlight, especially the one where the Union decided that its cellar of wine had to be consumed after they discovered many bottles had become corked. Also at the end of the first year we invited Nick Vickers, the Director of the Sir Herman Black Gallery at Sydney University, to open the show and afterwards we (Nick, and the committee members) ended up at the home of a local television celebrity. Here things unraveled into the surreal as she showed us through her large house, discovering a nude couple in her bath when she opened the door to show us her large bathroom. Nick was most impressed with Newcastle's bohemian lifestyle!

Ashley: While my memories of my time at Watt Space are filled with emotional turmoil, financial hardship and hazy Christmas parties furnished with quality wine from the Union cellar, the moment that stands out as most memorable is a hectic last minute exhibition installation for the annual acquisitive show. The then Watt Space Assistant, Michelle Maartensz and myself were hanging the show well into the early hours of September 11th 2001. We listened to the reports of the terrorist attacks in the USA on a small radio we found in the office. Now, whenever September 11 comes up in conversation and somebody asks the obligatory question, 'Where were you?' it is also an excuse for me to indulge in nostalgic reverie about Watt Space.

3. Why is Watt Space so successful as a student gallery?

Penny: Because of the range of experiences made available to students exhibiting there – not just showing their work but all the behind-the-scenes stuff that goes into exhibiting, which holds them in good stead for the future. The spirit of the foundation of Watt Space was one of fearlessness.

Ross: Watt Space exists because staff and students did battle prejudice against, and neglect of, our disciplines in the University and, with a mixture of guile and force, demanded an equitable share of the University and Union budget.

Ashley: Watt Space is a successful student gallery for a number of reasons. The inner city location is an obvious one, but also the annual installment of a student committee provides fantastic experience that students can take with them to other projects when they finish their degree. These might include artist-run spaces (as was the case for me), or other gallery and museum work but also the Watt Space experience provides students with the opportunity to develop confidence in exhibiting their work. But Watt Space would never have been able to develop this environment if not for the continued support from UoN Services Limited. Without this support there would be no gallery, let alone a successful one. Since leaving Newcastle the unique opportunities that Watt Space offers has become more and more apparent. After seeing a number of art schools without a decent off-campus gallery space the importance of Watt Space has become more obvious to me and students should be mindful of how lucky they are to have it.

Claire: For people that have never exhibited before it is the best way of getting a 'Gallery Experience'. For many it is their first introduction in to the world of art as a commodity, yet without having any pressure on them to sell their work.

4. Is there anything that could be improved about Watt Space?

(surprisingly there was only one answer to this question)

Ashley: Not having been involved with Watt Space for a few years now it is difficult to say exactly how it could be improved. But I do recall that the exhibition selection was a little more competitive when I was an undergraduate. This meant that there was a certain level of quality ensured in the work that did get selected for exhibition, and those that were rejected were given advice on how to improve.

5. Up until this point, what do you think the best exhibition that you have experienced at Watt Space has been and why?

Penny: *est res magna tacere* by Darrin Morgan – tiny pieces of polished glass in the Hoist - a difficult space to use successfully, but he did. One fantastic show I remember was *Queen for a Day* - it coincided with the Queen's Birthday holiday weekend. Students drew the floor plan of Buckingham Palace on the floor of the Gallery and the Queen visited to open the show, followed by a very risqué performance by a different type of queen. The web site Ross constructed kept track of all these things and more – it reflected the creative spirit of the students at the Gallery's heart.

Ross: The great shows at Watt Space are too numerous to mention but a few have lodged in my memory. Susan Jacobs' and Brad Cooney's *An Installation* in the Locker Room, Darrin Morgan in the Hoist with *est res magna tacere* and that strangely compelling little show by Melissa Ratliff in 1999, I

think, *A Hole to Shine Through*. I could go on but enough is enough.

Ashley: This is the most difficult question as there have been some many good ones and all that free cask wine at Watt Space openings has not done my memory any favours. But let's see, Rebecca Andrews' *MA 15+* in 2002, Julian Ramsay's *Drum Solo* series of performances and exhibitions were both great, and coming out of the old Union St studio Dominic Kavanagh's *Rebellious Bedroom* and Luke Thurgate and Kristian Glynn's *We Love Symmetry II* were definite standouts.

Claire: As a fan of things that are completely excessive and over the top I would have to name *Knit Knot* – an installation by Ruth Feeney, Kate Parker, Maree Van Tent, Erin King and Largo Von Bismarck of French Knitting that became a forest in the Loading Zone.

5. What do you see think will happen to Watt Space in the next 20 years?

Penny: Difficult question in that the fate of University art schools themselves is in the balance, but hopefully it will continue to have a range of directors who will be able to address all the issues. The spirit of the foundation of Watt Space was one of fearlessness.

Jacquie: This gallery still has an important role to play in the lives of art students. It is independent and can afford to sponsor cutting edge exhibitions, showcasing the talents and the contemporary nature of post-modern art.

Ashley: In the next 20 years I can see Watt Space being mostly underwater due to melting icebergs but I believe that this will be positive rather than negative because by then we will be wearing silver jumpsuits that include breathing apparati as by then underwater living will have become a necessity. This will open up opportunities for new art practices never seen before and Watt Space's previously coastal location will make it one of the first galleries to 'go under' placing it at the forefront of the new submarine avant-garde.

Claire: I would like to see the carpet in the Long Room gone!! Although I am sure I frequently irritate other committee members with my ruthless commercial ambitions, the current model is very successful and serves the students well. Anne McLaughlin is an excellent director and keeps everybody reined in and on track with out diminishing their rampant artistic personalities.

Co-ordinated by Claire Parker, 2009 Watt Space Committee, with assistance from Angela Philp