

The rooms

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Nothing disappears completely.

— Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1974

All objects occupy a contested space. This is a theory with particular relevance to New Zealand, a place with a divisive colonial past and a lingering distrust of art and artists.¹ In *Community Service: A Reading Room*, North Projects has let objects from artist-run initiatives of Christchurch's recent past inhabit their space. It is a diverse collection of objects: posters, publications, a record player (blaring Joy Division's 'New Dawn Fades' when I walk in), books, specially built mounts and furniture, and Sean Kerr's film *Run Artist Run* (2011) playing on a small TV. Yet they all share something important.

In the back room of the gallery there is a reading area. The books here are lifted from artist's personal collections and informed a time when artist-run initiatives like High Street Project, South Island Art Projects and CASKO were active in Christchurch (basically the 90s and, in some cases, through to the 00s). Nearly all of these books, laid out covers facing up, have 'Louise Palmer' inscribed inside in blue ink. There is a range of genres; among them Clarice Lispector's *Selected Crônicas*, *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus, *Derek Jarman's Garden* and *Chroma* by Derek Jarman, *Elemental Passions* by Luce Irigaray, and *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre. All of them look well thumbed.

Lefebvre wrote *The Production of Space* after splitting from the radical Marxist political group the Situationist Internationale. He was also banned from the French Communist Party. It seems that he was personally familiar with contested space. My own copy of *The Production of Space* is the same edition (published by Blackwell with Paul Klee's *Uncomposed in Space* on the cover), printed year-after-year through the 90s after its first English translation appeared in 1991. I found it in a shipping container filled with books at a junkyard where I bought it for 10 cents. 'P R Elliott ChCh '96' is inscribed on the underside of the front and back covers. There is a large crease in the spine, so it opens naturally to part three of the chapter 'Social Space.'

As it develops, then, the concept of social space becomes broader.

—Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

The main room of North Projects is another reading area of sorts. Instead of books there is a collection of catalogues, posters, and texts from the High Street Project (1992-2011), CASCO (August-September 1997), and South Island Art Projects (1992-1996). Objects and ephemera from a few more recent spaces like Dog Park Art Project Space (2012-2013), Room Four (2011-2014), and 183 Milton Street (2011) are also present (e.g. a Dog Park tote bag hanging on the wall).

These are objects from exhibitions gone by and spaces that have since disappeared. In all the rooms, the objects are placed on mismatched mounts and furniture put together by artists behind Room Four. The aforementioned records providing the soundtrack are from Tim Middleton's collection, which he played at exhibition openings while running 183 Milton Street. The different spaces present here are all decisively gone,² but the contested space they filled remains; notwithstanding the intervening years, natural disasters, and shifting tastes in books and music—the space for fringe, occasional, and dissident art cut off from established, “permanent” space.

The link between these spaces is circular then; like Sean Kerr running around a suburban roundabout in *Run Artist Run*, which is playing on a loop on its own in an adjacent room.

With the advent of modernity time has vanished from social space.

—Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

In a summary catalogue for CASKO,³ Merrisa Claire vehemently outlines the direction and aim of the space and its new presence in Christchurch. The essence is simple, almost mild: an encouraging space for experimental, emerging, and local artists. Its radicalness comes from the ‘exploitive containment and repression’ of other spaces for art. The feeling of being inside a white, smooth, suffocating space.

North Projects does not occupy such a space. In a physical sense, the objects are housed in one half of a converted weatherboard villa on the fringe of St Albans. A hearth and a bench/pantry combo in the main gallery space betray one room's former life. It's an in-between space that has been responded to, rather than sanitised and purged. The social, critical and—in some ways, physical—space it occupies closely resembles that of the bygone initiatives in the exhibition: a contested one.

The objects in *Community Service: A Reading Room* are not defined solely by what came earlier. This is no archive or history. Instead, the objects reflect on the space that North Projects inhabits. They dissimulate a community and a series of social relationships and experiences that exist in that space. That can only exist in that space.

¹ Bill Pearson's essay 'Fretful Sleepers' (1952) provides a telling insight into this attitude.

² On the front of the tote bag is a photo of a Dog Park sign being thrown into a rubbish pit.

³ Merrisa Claire, 'Cultivating the Hinge: CASKO and the Revision of Space' (1997)
<http://physicsroom.org.nz/archive/Casko/casko.htm>