

**Interview with David Rosetzky from 1st Floor, by Sandra Bridie
December 1997**

Sandra Bridie Can you talk about how and when 1st Floor started, was it in '93?

David Rosetzky '94.

SB Right.

DR I guess it started with the basic scenario of leaving art school, I'd been out of school about a year and a half, just wanting to become involved once again with a group of people, getting feedback, and response to work in an ongoing way and also showing work in a professional manner in a gallery space.

SB What was your experience of exhibiting up until that time?

DR I hadn't shown much personally, I had just been in a few group shows, Store 5 and stuff like that. So Store 5 was a model of sorts for 1st Floor as one of the early artist run spaces which was running at that time in the late '80s early '90s.

SB Was Temple running in '94?

DR I'm not sure. I think Basement and 1st Floor started at the same time. I guess Store 5 was a model in so far that it was an artist run gallery which had a very impressive program, it seemed to function well, it had a regular audience and people were taking notice of it outside of Melbourne.

SB By having the experience of exhibiting in a space like Store 5, even in a group show there, did you get the idea of how running a space could dovetail into an individual practise? At that stage in your evolution, perhaps setting up a space was the only pragmatic choice available for exhibiting, realistically a young artist, just out of art school couldn't sit around and wait around for commercial galleries to pick you up.

DR I think it was clear that that just didn't happen, well if it did it was a joke anyway and you were a bit silly if you waited around for that. I think, also that experience of being at art school a people organising independent activity with the students. Because when I was there a lot of the people who were involved with 1st Floor, there were things like SWIM, Support Women Image Makers projects and then Store 5, you were involved with SWIM.

SB Yeah, I gave one presentation for SWIM.

DR I think they were quite important examples of what you can do.

SB Was it your idea starting 1st Floor, or was it a group idea?

DR Founding 1st Floor? It was initially my idea; I wanted to do something like that. I happened to be living in a space which I thought would be very suitable.

SB So it was your living space.

DR Yeah I was living there with my brother, and he is a commercial photographer. The original space was really quite large and grand in comparison to what we have now.

SB Was it too big?

DR No, not in way, it was exciting starting in something quite grand. Making an impact at the beginning was important, having that level of excitement, I think people need that.

SB Were you protected from costs with that first space because it was your brother's space?

DR It wasn't so much his space, we were sharing it. No not really because we had to charge for the shows and they were actually really expensive looking back, I can't believe that people actually – I think it was something like \$200.00 for a three day show, which sounds absurd now. We had three day shows because the space was also used as a living room and a photographic studio. It didn't work very well. It did in terms of a gallery, because we were always very efficient so we always made sure that everything was up and that things were there on time. So we were only there for about a year, because we'd already generated quite a regular audience.

SB That's almost the opposite to integrating lifestyle and exhibiting practice. You were utilising the same space, but it involved packing away your living space for the room to take on the guise of a gallery.

DR It was really weird and it made the whole idea of role playing a bit more obvious because you'd basically pack away your breakfast things, and replace it with an artist's space. Replace it with a public domain. So that was in '94 and then in '95 we moved to the new space in Victoria Street Fitzroy which works a lot better and is easier and it's also a lot more public in it's being close to Brunswick Street. It's also quite good in that it's in a building that is inhabited by other people like commercial photographers and artists as well. I think that was originally a problem as well, we were really anal, we'd hear taps running and a radio playing from above and we'd be complaining 'We've got an exhibition going on downstairs and there are some important people coming in to see it and we can't have any of your noise coming in to infiltrate our beautiful space!' I think that was quite an interesting lesson learnt and I think now there is something I appreciate more in that I do let the space be a part of ... like you are here, there's other things going on here, you're not just a separate entity.

SB Did you have aims about what structure you wanted to set up with 1st Floor. Did you have an idea about the amount of people you wanted to be involved, what sort of guidelines did you have?

DR No it was really vague at the beginning. It was just an idea and it began by talking to a number of people and saying 'I'm thinking of doing this, what do you think about it?' One of the original aims was involving artists and writers and that came from...

SB – yes that's peculiar to 1st Floor I think. Do you want to talk about that, the relationship between the artists and writers, the equal calibre for both?

DR That was something that was there from the beginning.

SB Was that your idea?

DR Yeah it was. I asked writers to be involved in the beginning as well, as part of the group. That happened basically because a lot of my contemporaries were going through the Critical Theory department at Monash and the Art History department at Melbourne Uni, so it just made sense.

SB Were they artists as well?

DR No, well, maybe you should ask them.

SB And you use the text, I think, in a particular way. Do you think 1st Floor has a specific way of approaching the text?

DR I'm not sure, it's hard to say. I think that has happened in a way.

SB Text as object or something.

DR Yeah, that was something that we discussed from the beginning, how can we present text as a parallel to the art rather than just being about it? That was one of the original concerns to do that and I think in some cases it hasn't worked and in some cases it has and things have come out of it, like the 'textbase' project stemmed from that and a number of collaborative exhibitions. I think it's important for writers to work with artists in a very, if you like, casual relationship, to work with them in an ongoing way over a number of years so there's an understanding of their practice through working together. I think that's been really quite exciting.

SB It will be interesting to see – you know how you have a retrospective of an artists work – to have a look at the common approach of a writer to the object, what seems to be the themes that are carried through, to read their works as a group.

DR And I think it's interesting when our generation was coming through art school there was this real divide between the theory and the practice and there were a lot of lecturers at art school who were antagonistic toward theory and practice that was in some way in response to theory, they were really defensive about it. I guess that's where the whole idea of incorporating the writers with the artists came from. It's been quite an interesting relationship in terms of that

natural antagonism between writing and art practice, just seeing how that panned out over the years.

SB Have there been any problems with the writing, between the writers and the artists?

DR Yeah, I think so.

SB It would be hard not to see the writer as representing the artist in some way, but the artist: I can't see it the other way around.

DR That's a good point actually. That probably really seldom happens.

SB 'Look what you've done to my writing with that picture, you've fucked it up!'

DR 'You're misrepresenting me!'

SB You've got a really large group involved in the space, do you have two committees?

DR We have different committees or work groups with whoever feels like working on a project at a time. The large core group is about eighteen or nineteen, there are about five writers and the rest are artists and then we have a rotating selection committee who work out the six monthly exhibition program. When we have specific projects that people want to do; there might be other committees formed, like when we did the publication there was a group that worked on that.

SB The core group is the pool of people that you select from or who volunteer their skills.

DR Other projects can be and are initiated outside of that core group through the submission of proposals.

SB I'd say that that idea of the core group or pool of people and utilising the space as a working space for them, primarily as the people who have the first right to the space is something that we've drawn on here at TALK and I'd say Grey Area have been informed by your model too. The venue being there to service the group first, which is the primary function of an artist run space, I think.

DR I think it's really worthwhile. I think it's really important for people to think that they've got a space which is their own.

SB To keep things rolling.

DR That they have control over, and can work on whatever projects they want.

SB What's your commitment to 1st Floor, time-wise? As director do you commit a certain amount of time per week to the space?

DR That's really hard for me to say. There might be certain periods where I spend a lot of time working on 1st Floor related projects, whether it be the calendar or the publication or an exhibition coming up, it's hard to say. Also depending on who's showing, if it's members of 1st Floor there will be less work to do but if it's outside people I tend to be the coordinator of the space which does take up a lot of time.

SB Your job sounds more like you coordinate the operations of 1st Floor, you seem to need to have a sense of how the potentially unwieldy elements, or a number of elements are working and then move amongst them to keep things rolling rather than overseeing them.

DR Director is a worrying title, really. Coordinator is more descriptive of the role I play.

SB They are all just nominations I guess.

DR I think it is important to have one person that does have an overseeing view just in terms of the efficiency of the space, and to have a contact person. It just seems to work better otherwise things can dissipate: you need to keep an eye on things. Certain people take up on different things, say, if someone needs to go away, for a show there are other people who can take on the various roles.

SB I've found it hard to work out what your role is in practical terms even though yours is the name that's brought up in relation to 1st Floor. I don't think you are signaturing the space.

DR It's a group project.

SB So the aesthetic of 1st Floor, you would say, is not reflecting back on your own personal aesthetic?

DR Obviously, I think in a lot of cases it does, in conjunction with those of other members, but not all the time. And the majority of the core group members are people I feel aligned with, we went through school together and we share some similar ideas, though people's individual practices are quite diverse. I think that has become clearer over the years that people really have quite different concerns. I think that's something you can only really discover over a number of years because people mature in different ways and I think that takes time to pan out.

SB You were all in your early twenties when you started weren't you?

DR Yeah, young and optimistic.

SB Do you think the style of the gallery has changed? What evolutions have happened in that time?

DR I think it has changed a lot. I think things have broadened out a lot. The idea of the first show was the introduction of a number of young emerging artists and giving them a platform, some visibility saying, 'here we are and we're going to work together for awhile', a group of artists and writers working and showing regularly in a space, but since we've been going for a few years we've all evolved. Now we are working with a broader community of artists and public and I think that's where the idea of allowing people to put in proposals...

SB You didn't initially do that?

DR No it was more by invitation, and it took a while to decide on that idea of accepting proposals. I think that it was a really important thing to do, the whole idea of, what is the gallery, is it something that is just for the artists and their peers, or does it involve the public.

SB You do get bound up in your own taste, if all you are doing is selecting things that reflect back to yourself.

DR What happens at 1st Floor is there are a lot of different projects that happen at the same time and I think that works quite well, in terms of the writing project and the curatorial project, or an individual artists practice or emerging artists being able to show.

SB Your curatorial project, what's that?

DR I mean curatorial projects in terms of artists who are interested in curating exhibitions.

SB Do you designate an amount of space in your program for that?

DR It's not that structured, we do that in a fairly ad hoc sort of a way, in terms of balancing, it would be good to have a number of group shows. But it also depends on what people are wanting to work with at the time. That is part of the beauty of being able to do what you want, not having to follow guidelines in terms of the program.

SB Do you think you are loosening up what were much more fixed ideas at some stage, are you always learning new things and adapting as you go along?

DR I think it is both of that. Because I think when you come out of art school you are really uptight and you really want to...

SB You need to initially control the space to define it.

DR Yeah you want to control everything, 'take me seriously, here I am, we're all really important' Which is good and you need to prove yourself but then you gain a bit of confidence where things open up and allow for different possibilities to happen and for mistakes and experimentation. Which is part of the reason why you set up, but I think it's ironic that it's sooo important that you get it right, do you know I mean?

SB Yes, you can't have fuck ups. You sound like you began with quite an ambitious idea of how 1st Floor would work career wise, as a space.

DR I think career is quite a weird concept and the idea of an artist having a career is even more strange.

SB There seems to be quite a number of 'successes' attached to 1st Floor.

DR In terms of artists who have gone on to show at higher profile galleries?

SB Yeah and I would say aesthetically I think 1st Floor is the most clearly defined of the Melbourne artist run spaces, the most successful as far as artists being picked up by commercial galleries, the space being looked to by contemporary commercial spaces and public spaces. I think there's a consistency in quality and the kind of look of work seen there. I'm not saying the work is all the same, but there is an adherence to a type of aesthetic.

DR Maybe that comes from the fact that we're all from a similar generation. It's interesting, because this question often comes up 'there seems to be this clearly defined 1st Floor aesthetic, what is it?' We as a group have often discussed it; maybe we all just wear similar clothes.

SB It's a material thing, very much so, often – a minimal materialism that plays with tactile qualities.

DR Effects of surface and stuff like that. Without relying on that sort of formalism.

SB Which you could say was something that was identified at Store 5 before you, definitely, but at 1st Floor the materiality of the work is much more playful and diverse and it can be very sophisticated too.

DR I guess that was a given at the time and is still lingering on today. I think it's really weird that that's been such an important practice in Melbourne and Australia that whole formalist thing.

SB The kind of cruddy materialism that is also part of the Melbourne formalism meant that anybody could do it from materials they found on the street or in the craft shop. I think Store 5 came out of a very pragmatic approach to exhibiting, the materials came from what might find around you: dirt cheap, without requiring a huge amount of craft. But I think what I might identify with 1st Floor and I don't know how interesting this is, is a playfulness and opening up possibilities for useable materials.

DR That sounds OK. I think in a way that's happening with the relationship with writing as well, looking for possibilities rather than the final definitive thing.

SB I think there are some successful bits of writing to come out of 1st Floor. When you set up were you conscious of how you wanted to record your activities? This is what I think comes back to a formalist intellectual model, the idea of the archive.

DR That was something we were quite conscious of to begin with – to archive all the exhibitions we had.

SB In what ways?

DR Just slide documentation and also to keep copies of the writing. Basically it would function because people would come in and say 'We've heard about you and we would like to come but we wouldn't necessarily be able to make it within the three days', because when we started we only had the three day shows, so it was necessary in a way for the space to function in that format as well, as the archive rather than just as the gallery.

SB That's a fairly simple procedure isn't it, just keeping the texts and slides.

DR Yeah, though of course we're not that organised and things are all over the place and coffee has been spilt over everything.

SB That's what makes them interesting. But you weren't so interested in the archive as object, like the idea of needing to fix something that's ephemeral or time based, needing to fix and fix again.

DR In terms of needing to document ephemeral installations it's important in that regard, but not important as an object.

SB You're not compulsive about it, I think conceptual art was often over compensating for the lack of seeming object by creating another museifiable one in the documentation. Getting bound up in the possibilities of the thing and needing to document every permutation of an idea, or part of the process to it.

DR No it's not that, it's more practical

SB What kind of success have you had at applying for grants with 1st Floor, do you have members on the committee who are really good at writing grant applications?

DR We've applied for a number of grants but it's difficult because they require so much work and it's disappointing when you don't get them; putting so much work into getting the material together, and it's a bore a lot of the time and if you don't get it it's hard to keep it up. But we got one from the Australia Council in '95 for the running of '96. We were able to get a computer and things to set up the space, so it could work in a vaguely professional manner, and we put out the publication which documented the '95 program and that was partly funded by Arts Victoria and we've got some sponsorship from small businesses around the local area. We always say we should spend more time applying for things but it's really hard, when it comes down to it you'd rather spend your time doing the work or getting an exhibition together rather than applying for a grant.

SB The way you need to couch these applications is so aggressively assertive.

DR Do you apply for grants?

SB Yeah, but I find it really difficult to use that language, that false confidence, but maybe that will come over time, knowing what the space's value is, and knowing what we have the right to ask for.

Are you despondent about the funding situation? I think some other spaces are, because of the unlikelihood of being included in grants. But also some spaces feel they are being used as taste makers whilst at the same time they are being overlooked as far as support goes and I think this is where they think the betrayal is going on.

DR Yeah, that is a problem but at the same time it's not what we're focussing on. We just tend to want to do our projects and at the moment we seem to be running fairly independently and there is a freedom which goes with that which is quite good.

SB So you are not exerting any effort to put the grant applications in so you are not disappointed that you're not getting any!

DR Yeah, that's right, we're not trying that hard, and so to turn around and to say 'that's fucked and there's no money!' would be a little bit lame, I think. But in terms of the last round of Australia Council grants that was fucked because no artists run spaces in Victoria got any.

SB Except for the \$1,900 Emerging Artist Fund money, which was token 'shut up and stop complaining' money.

DR Which is just hysterical really, because there are so many artist run spaces in Melbourne and we do have that strength and it is proven that it produces artists of quality because they are picked up by major institutions and used in exhibitions in other states etc so the product is considered quality and they are taking it up but they are not funding it which I think is shocking.

SB Do you have to outlay much money yourselves or yourself for the space, do you find yourself constantly dipping into your pocket?

DR Not really, it does happen occasionally, but not really, maybe more in the beginning but not so much now, the artist or the exhibitor pays for the rental and covers the running cost of the gallery.

SB So you've worked it out so you are not out of pocket. On the question of time, how do you balance your own practice with being the director of 1st Floor?

DR I don't know its just a bit of a scramble.

SB Do you find it depleting?

DR Not really. I find it all works in and benefits each respective field, apart from the money work, which we'd rather not have to do.

SB Route 66.

DR But that's interesting, I think it is important to work outside the art field because otherwise you are living in your own little world. So working in a shop feeds into it.

SB With your own practice, do you allocate a particular time for that?

DR No not at all.

SB You work on projects when they come up.

DR And in between. I'm not a very structured person in terms of my own time.

SB I was saying before that I perceived, or perhaps I am wanting to perceive more of a sense of levity in the approach of a few people who are working at 1st Floor. I am thinking of you and also I am thinking of Brett Vallance, of artists peopling the work, representing a social group rather than an artistic group. There seems to be a recreational engagement that is the subject of the work.

DR I think that is something that is interesting a number of people that are working at 1st Floor, a number of the artists, like Lyndal Walker who documents lifestyles of our community. I think that is something that is particularly interesting to me and is happening, the idea of lifestyle and documenting that and the cross over between art and life. On the social level the interaction with the space, and the parties.

SB How good are they?

DR From what I've heard they are fantastic! I think it is very important that social aspect in terms of the function of the gallery as something that the artistic community and the local community and a generation of people is functioning on a number of levels, interacting and looking at art being part of a broader life experience.

SB The recreational thing is not recreation as art, you are not creating happenings.

DR It's not so self-conscious.

SB I was wondering – saying that too, whether you were creating a fiction of a recreational activity? Are you creating an authentic document or inventing a document of someone else's? I'm thinking of the 'Trash' show that Brett did.

DR I don't think its one or the other.

SB Was he representing his own social group in that work?

DR I think in a way that is one of the things he does is go to these various nightclubs and hangs out with that social group. But I think he quite specifically set out to photograph that for his exhibition so I think there are a number of things going on. It's weird, in terms of creating fictions about yourself or your social group which is part of a number of people's projects, like Lyndal's share household project. I think that's where work like that is most interesting where you've got this constructed persona or lifestyle which is being used in advertising, so you are looking at it at the same time you are living it in real life. I personally find all of that really interesting, because there are so many conflicting fictions at different levels, a number of artists are doing work that is looking at that .In a way it's like reclaiming your life, but yet also realising that you play a passive role.

SB Do you feel that your own work can be included in this discussion? Your last show sounded as if it was informed by a similar impulse.

DR It was similar; the show included a video in a constructed tableau of Chris Gill. Chris DJ's at 1st Floor parties and works at the local video store. I am very interested in the idea of the local meaning of works and local identities, people who mean something very specific. Just reading the dress codes, Cris' afro is a retro seventies style that is happening generally in cities around the world, so it's like that generic nature of identity and also the local.

SB I guess I am interested in the aspect of locality and using the representation of it that people use for their own personal recollection; snapshots, home videos etc, that aesthetic. I wonder whether this is a trend everywhere or where it's more peculiar to Melbourne where we might figure it's about time we represented ourselves because we've always been in the habit of overlooking our own location, skipped the place, and skipped the present to get to somewhere else.

DR Do you think it is something that's happening around Melbourne, rather than in other cities?

SB It's about time it happened here.

DR Or just the idea of people looking at their own local environment. I guess it's the whole idea of the art centre, not worrying about going to the centre or of there being an international style, valuing your own environment. That's something that I find quite interesting at the moment, but at the same time you don't want to fall into the trap of being complaisant and self satisfied, thinking that yours is the most interesting city and that we've got it all here.

SB I think you apply the same kind of enquiry to almost any place you go, the deeper you get into it the more interesting it becomes. Creating an artists space is a generating activity too, each generation of young artists has the same need to create a place for themselves to inhabit.

DR It is interesting that you've got this show happening and you've got five or six artist run spaces and it is representing a kind of community of artists that is also social and fairly supportive of each other's space and go to openings etc.

SB I think that might be a Melbourne thing, and I have no experience to gauge that against but the interaction here is pretty lively, and the sense that all these spaces have no problems with the idea of exchange with other spaces within your own city.

DR I think it is exciting that all of this is happening right now, and I think that's a strength of the artist run space, that we are not in competition with other artist run spaces like commercial galleries might be so it really gets down to the world in the sense of the community, so it gets back down to the art and people. That's what's exciting about Melbourne and this artist run space phenomenon that's happening.

SB 1st Floor has had exchanges with CBD in Sydney, is it only CBD?

DR CBD in Sydney and some artists at Side On have shown at 1st Floor. The only official exchange was with CBD that worked really well in terms of meeting artists from other cities and talking with them but also in terms of presenting the work in a similar context and looking at the differences of how they run as a space. I think that's something which is quite exciting, the whole idea of a network of artist run spaces, on a local and also international level, I think will occur more,

SB Are you thinking of that sort of exchange? Have you established contact with anybody?

DR We have established contact with a number of artist run spaces overseas and there is interest. I think that's something that's going to grow across the board, this idea of a network of artist run spaces on an international level, on a low key level, because there's not much funding. But I think that's really exciting.

SB I think it would be fascinating to go overseas and see the structures within a regional centre where artist run spaces are, to make those connections through a common activity.

SB I think we've covered my questions anyway, is there anything that you thought that you wanted to say, or had in mind?

DR Not really, I thought I would just do what I was told.

SB (laughs)