

**Conversation with Julia Gorman and Andrea Blundell, by Sandra Bridie**

**Grey Area Art Space Inc**

SB Just talking for a little while about how Grey Area came about from a bunch of ex RMIT students looking for a decent studio in the city, the idea of an artist's space didn't seem planned, at all. It was more like an opportunity came from somewhere else and then you took it up.

JG I mean it wasn't completely unplanned, because people had always been thinking of starting a space without actually physically getting a space. So we had the studio, which was above Port Phillip Arcade, which at that time had a lot of vacant shops, and was pretty dead as an arcade. So the owners of the arcade offered us a shop with free rent, just occasionally giving them an art work, and we ummed and aaahed for awhile over whether we should do it, and then we opened in July last year.

SB It seemed like the scale of the venture was humble enough for it not to be too scary, you weren't paying rent, so you didn't initially have too worry too much about big finances. A small space, close to your studios, so the opening of such a space could be as inauspicious as you wanted it to be. It could almost be a non-event to start with.

JG Well we didn't really know what we wanted. We weren't clear enough about what we were doing to make it deliberately a non-event.

AB Everyone was just enthusiastic about knowing they had a show in the next six months.

JG But it was pretty messy when we first moved in.

SB You had to do quite a lot of work to it?

JG And the first show was Georgina Constandikopoulos, and she put concrete everywhere. No, the walls were clean.

AB No, not really, she used the shop as we found it. So the walls were pink and there was a sink and a little construction in the corner, and then after here show we had a three day working bee where we demolished it, painted and stripped it. Those were twelve or fourteen hour days, with six people in the gallery, banging away.

JG It was Lorissa next, and she wanted the walls perfect.

SB It's kind of nice to have a show with the space as is, without it being a big deal. Because usually that's what you don't see, I know with our space, I took photos of the space, as it was being altered from what we found it as, and exhibited those photos after the space had been fixed up.

AB We considered having a group show for the opening show, and I think it came around that George's show sounded to be the most interesting because it was presenting the space to people as it was, rather than just as a gallery space, the white cube, so her show instigated a use of the space as it presented itself, rather than just the placement of things.

JG But we went back to the white cube very quickly after that and never deviated.

SB So how many people are involved in Grey Area, and are they all the people who utilise the studios upstairs?

JG Pretty well. When we started it was everyone in the studio, and then a couple of people left.

AB They went to Tasmania.

JG But remember other people left – Tim and Will.

SB So there were a few teething problems?

JG Yeah, because we didn't really know them. They weren't actually artists, they were engineers. They wanted to do some sound, so they got involved with the gallery and were very enthusiastic for awhile, and then they got bored with us.

SB So, who started it up?

JG Tim, Will, Juliana and David who moved to Tasmania –

AB Tim and Will came in after we'd begun, after we'd found the studio and opened the gallery, and then left. Juliana and David were both integral at the beginning, and then David got a scholarship and moved to Tasmania.

JG And so the original people left are me and Andy, Emma Woolley, Georgina Constandikopoulos, Michael Graeve, Andrew McCausland, Lorrissa Kossloff. This year we've got Helen Gibbons who did sculpture at RMIT, Ricky Swallow, who did drawing at VCA>

AB Helen's been great, actually because she's had quite a bit of involvement with Gertrude Street and the CCP.

SB So she knows how to go about applying for grants etc.

JG And keeping a level head.

AB I suppose her experience gives her a degree of professionalism, or an approach that I think has been really healthy this year.

SB She's be a good contact person too, if she's had, if she's had those other experiences, people might know her through that, so that's handy. Do people ask to be involved, do you have a selection process, or is it just if it feels right.

JG If someone moves into the studio, and if they want to be involved and we think they'd be good.

AB Actually we did talk about it quite a bit last year about how we'd structure people coming in and out, and most people believed that being involved in the studios is really important for people being on the committee, so trying to keep it in house. And their practice is integral to everything that's going on.

SB So it's the practice, the proximity to the space.

AB Creating some sort of working community. It's the energy in the work practice, which I think a lot of people found really important after leaving university.

SB Would you see your space as a space for 'emerging artists'? Do you have problem with that term? It seems to be the year of artist run spaces seen as being run by emerging artists, and I think some spaces can claim that they are run by emerging artists.

AB I personally don't have a problem with that, but I hesitate to say that the ten people are happy with that.

SB You can't speak for the group.

AB No, but we were people who had just left university, had little or no exhibiting experience, and we took the project on, partly to allow ourselves to gain experience, and also partly to allow other people in our position to do the same. I think that fits into the 'emerging artist' category quite neatly.

JG At first we were the only ones who showed there last year.

SB And it sounds like you have an emerging sense of what the space, Grey Area, is, because I think other spaces – well I know our space started up with quite a clear image of what the models were we were working from, and what an artist run space was, and why you set up an artist run space. Your space sounds like it was set up with a more intuitive approach or seeing how it works, not having a big plan, or seeing yourselves in terms of the art world, or even the art community.

JG We didn't see ourselves in terms of the art world at all. Still we are running into people – like I saw Rob Schubert the other day and he said, 'Grey Area, yeah I have to get down there', or they say, 'Grey Space, where is that, what happens down there?'.

SB But then lots and lots of other people know about it, I suppose, because we're in the same block with City Lights as well, and Platform No 2 at Degraives Street, we get lots of people who have just been to Grey Area coming into Talk, so it seems to me that everybody knows about Grey Area.

JG Well nobody did at the start.

AB Piccolo has helped!

SB It's such a cute little cafe.

AB But I think an interesting thing about the way the space has evolved is because I think we do have an unusually large committee –

SB It generates its own audience?

AB Well partly, but also because we had studied together, everybody has quite different work practices, views on art work, the art world, so the gallery doesn't just coast along, I guess in the decision making process, there's always a range of views presented, and I think that's quite positive.

SB So you have to create a balance and consider all views.

AB Yeah, so I think that helps, even though lots of spaces become known for site specific work, and that's a trait that's definitely developed, having all these different opinions and personal directions stops the space perhaps, from getting a bit stagnant. The two new people coming onto the committee this year from outside the original base, one from sculpture and one from VCA, had really livened up, a) the energy and b) the audience. I think continuing to work like that and broadening the base, is something that everyone is quite interested in.

SB It's always good to have the change.

I'll make this a statement and not a question, I think you have a house style at Grey Area, or if not a house style, then a commonality of approach to the space, and that's addressing the idiosyncrasies of the gallery, the bits that jut out, the oddness of the space. I think that's a distinctive feature of the work that is seen in Grey Area. Do you agree with that? As members, can you see a style emerging from the shows there?

JG Yeah, I think everyone does address those odd features.

SB It is such a strange space isn't it?

JG I think firstly when we had shows last year it was interesting to address that. Then the second time it was a drawback.

AB After having seen the second run of shows, people seem to be putting more of their personal agendas that are in their work back into the shows. In the first year it was necessary to expand and grow.

SB That might be a maturing thing too, being able to address personal issues, presuming that you can, after first maybe thinking that you need to have 'a look of' something

JG Well, just knowing the space so well, it's hard to conceive of a show without taking those things into account. In another space, well you've got your work and then you go in and you go, 'Uh, there's all these odd things I hadn't considered'. But with Grey Area, because we live above the shop, and you are always in there, you can really pay attention, and that's why these things come into the work so much.

SB Yes, an intimacy with the space, I think tells in the work. I saw a show last year by Carolyn Eskdale at Temple, and I think Temple is a really hard space to deal with. Because I had a show next door to her, and saw her set up, I figured you could only do the work she had done, and

scale it so perfectly into the space by being intimate with it; the work came through being in a constant relationship with the space. I guess with Grey Area, if you saw the space and you are someone who works in a formal way, you would address the peculiarities of the room, but maybe your approach would be a bit more nuanced.

JG I find it a bit annoying really.

SB Would you like to set up a false wall at the end of the space or something?

AB Sometimes you just want to be able to step back, and because it is such a long, narrow space, I guess it does, to a point, curtail what you put in there; I guess you want a range of exhibiting experiences after awhile. A big wall would be nice, more air.

SB It would be good to construct a false wall and keep it upstairs for when you needed it.

How does a text for the space work, and how do the notices for the shows work? Had you worked out a form that you wanted? I know you have the Grey Area Art Space Inc. rubber stamp, that that's important?

AB The gestetner as well.

SB Oh the roneo printer.

AB We, I guess, needed to find an economic way to produce material and everyone got really caught up with the romantic idea of primary school.

SB The smell just takes you back!

AB I think Michael and Andrew hunted for awhile.

JG They went into primary schools didn't they?

AB I think Michael got it from his old primary school, they dug it out from the store room for him. So that's been used for all the invitations for the whole time we've been going.

JG Well we used to print the text on the invitation and have a photocopied drawing –

AB –but when David left –

JG –but when David left, his special printer that would print on the carbon paper –

AB –dot matrix –

JG – was gone. And so we had to reverse, have photocopied text and a drawn image on the carbon. That was a big step! Some people weren't happy about it.

SB Yeah, I know, sometimes those things can loom very large, those kinds of choices. So it sounds as though you did want to define yourselves in terms of the form of the invitations.

JG Well we wanted something distinctive, and that is a distinctively low-tech invitation.

SB And a kind of connection with school – the fact that you had just come out of school. That kind of playful approach, I think, rather than being dead set earnest.

JG Well we couldn't afford anything that looked more professional. We had to make a virtue out of our poverty.

SB Do you stipulate that you have a text with the show, or is that something that comes and goes?

JG Well we did at the start.

AB It's kind of personal really, personal choice. I think the majority of exhibitors do have a text, but it's something they choose to do.

SB It's usually an A4 page isn't it?

AB Sometimes people have chosen to do collages of illustrations. It's more of a pictorial approach. Its given people a chance to a) write about their own work, or b) peers to write about their work, I don't think it's as integral to the space as say, First Floor's text.

SB Well First Floor defines itself as an artist and writers initiative don't they?

AB But it's still quite important. Do you agree Julia?

JG I think a lot of people have forgotten about it. It like its not very important, but then when you see people come into the gallery they are always looking for something to pick up, 'where's the text?'

SB Yeah, how do I look at the work? We have the interviews in our space for the viewer to walk away with, and I get a bit pissed off (I do this myself, pissed off seeing my own inconsiderate behaviour towards the art work), people just come in and pick up the interview, and it seems like they pick it up because its free, and because they are entertaining they don't have to look at the work, or they are just coming in collecting stuff. So as far as spaces and texts go: Temple have their little publication which they mail out, West Space has Dialogue, which is the most weighty volume to come out of artist run spaces here, First Floor, it seems that at your space its something that can feature when its important, but its not a central defining object of the space.

How have you approached documenting shows has that been something that has come about through experience, or did you, or did you work out how to archive the space from the beginning?

AB From the outset we organised to document every show, and began the archive from the first show, but technical difficulties were sorted out after about three shows with filters etc. So unfortunately the first three are a bit purple I think.

SB Which is OK is you have a show like your last one Andrea which was a lavender wall.

JG Now Michael does document every show and that's included in the cost of the show, but that's just for our archive, but people can get dupes of those, so it's always documented.

SB So just slides? Have you used video or anything to document your shows?

JG I don't think so.

SB Do you have a file?

JG Yeah, we have files.

SB And how did you work that out, was that working out what you needed as you needed it?

AB Michael got delegated 'archive keeper'.

JG I thought Helen was 'archive keeper'.

AB I thought Michael was.

JG Michael was 'in house documenter' but Helen actually looks after the files.

SB And are they scrupulously kept?

JG Oh absolutely! I think they are pretty good at the moment.

AB We've has a few people visiting from artist run spaces in Sydney, so its a good way of people getting an overview of what's been going on at the space rather than just being presented with one show, its good to present a learnt history.

JG Well remember when we had the Terry Whelan show, and someone thought that we shouldn't put in any work at all we should only represent the work in slides, because the work would look so different in another space, so we should only show slides of Grey Area.

SB Because a lot of the work is installation based. Emma Woolley's work in her last show, how would that look in another space?

Would you think of compiling the information into a publication, is that a plan at all?

AB Well yeah we talked about it last year, having a 1996 Grey Area, slide, work and text and a blurb, but tis more a funding problem really. Because I think the consensus was that it wasn't

really worth putting together in black and white, it would be much better to have colour, the work often loses something in black and white.

JG Our work is pretty colour based. It's a pretty important consideration, and it's something that people don't really mention that often. You were talking about in terms of installation, because we're all painters colour is very important. So it wouldn't be very interesting, it would be a boring publication without colour.

SB So that would make the cost almost prohibitive.

JG It's not really a priority.

AB It became fifteen dollars for each publication.

SB Maybe after five years. How do you see yourselves placed now, within the artist run spaces that currently exist in the city? Do you see yourselves in any way; I know you interact with other spaces. Would you say that you have more kinship with particular spaces than others aesthetically, or ideologically, or socially?

AB I don't think there's a Grey Area 'sistership' in Melbourne. You could say that there are various areas or specific characteristics of the spaces that relate to grey Area, but as a whole I don't think so. I think the spaces that have been set up have been set up by quite different groups of people; like Stripp is a bit more experienced.

JG Maybe we are the least experienced artists.

AB We are more experienced now.

SB You've had to learn. So were you looking to other models when you set up?

SB With our space we looked to – everywhere really informing what our space became, did you have a sense of what had been achieved at other spaces, liking it, thinking that it worked.

AB There was a lot of discussion around how we were going to identify ourselves so we were aware of everything else that was going on in Melbourne, but we didn't really come up with a point form Grey Area personality or anything like that.

JG Well we liked the way First Floor had the text, there wasn't really anywhere else we wanted to be like, I guess that's why we started our own space.

SB Its also the opportunities you can set up for yourself, you can show a lot more regularly in your own space, that would be one of the main reasons why you might set up a space to create an exhibiting routine for yourselves., one or two shows a year without having to battle to get them.

AB That's definitely a luxury.

SB Yeah, well it's a really important reason for setting up a space, it makes your own art practice a bit more practical and reality based and broader. I suppose I would think of the kinships between your space and other spaces I know of in Melbourne, with First Floor, in an aesthetic sense, Grey Area seems to me to address aesthetic, rather than ideological issues, or have a community focus.

JG Some people are interested in seeing the shop as just part of the arcade, normal everyday life just coming and going and that Grey Area should be seen as just another shop, where there's art there, and there's a hairdresser's there, but other people prefer to see it as a gallery on its own.

SB I think that's a really nice little corner of Melbourne, Flinders Lane and Swanton Street, its a shame that you have to know where to go, it would be nice to just happen across a gallery, and I think where you are positioned, that can happen, you are on the ground floor and people can see something different happening.

Do you get much response from passers by, get that passing trade thing?

JG Yeah you often see people passing by and laugh, 'What's in there!'

AB Or just a wide-eyed head turn, 'What are you selling?'

JG Other shops keepers get into it as well.

AB The hairdresser gives us a show report, for each show he walks in and gives his opinion and tries to get ideas about how to fabricate his shop.

SB Well that's great because maybe some of the people who see the work there wouldn't have thought of it as what they consider to be art, and so by seeing changing shows, and by seeing the energy that you are putting into it, and the commitment, then maybe that then validates something that's outside their taste..

JG The cake decorating school man was very hostile when we first opened.

SB Hostile, how?

JG What did he say, 'Why don't you just paint, this isn't art, what does this mean, can you just tell me what this means?!' Now he just makes jokes about it really, laughs at us. Because I think he had been the creative person in the arcade, and then we came along and started putting concrete on the walls.

SB So he was a bit envious, 'this isn't cake decorating!'

JG Actually after the Serrano incident there was a lot of comment, jokes from people about how they were going to piss in the gallery. Well I think they then realised how lovable and harmless we really are.

SB I think that playful element can be a part of a Grey Area aesthetic, there is something nice. My daughter Rubie has been to a few shows at Grey Area and she gets it, and enjoys it, and you don't have to try hard to convince her of the meaning of the work. Maybe for some adults it seems a bit regressive, but I think for other people I think its allowing that element of play to exist.

JG I think we're more playful this year than last year.

AB I think that has to do with knowing that you've got the show and just allowing for your practice to develop, and then putting the work into the space.

SB You can relax a little bit, and not make a big deal about it.

JG Because you know there'll be another one.

SB They won't reject you.

Do you have a sense of where you want to move to from here?

JG Not really, do we? We've been talking lately about needing some sort of a plan. We are really just trying to keep it open on a yearly basis. When we set it up we thought it would only be for six months, and then we thought, oh we'll do it for a year, and now we're going to do it for another year - so next year. But we don't have any plans for it to be an institution or anything. We don't have any long term goals.

SB Are you incorporating different things into your program do you think? Are there mainly solo shows?

JG They were at first, but this year we had 'Damp' and that brought a lot of people in.

SB Makes a difference a group show doesn't it?

JG And then a video show.

AB There's been a bit more flexibility with the programming, like there was one show that had rather than two weeks for one exhibition, two people wanted to exhibit but they had a week each, broadening the audience base.

SB And playing with form.

AB We feel a bit more pliable. The committee has also tended to change over so there's been a '96 committee and there's been a '97 committee.

SB And how many people are on the committee?

AB Ten.

SB And how did you change over from one committee to another?

AB See we don't really have a structure.

JG We tried to have sub-committees for awhile, but it just didn't work.

SB And there's no director? From my dealing with Grey Area, its whoever the person is that you are talking to has the authority to make a decision, you might confer with one or two others, but you can't confer with the whole lot otherwise all decision making would be too cumbersome.

AB I don't know how we did it. Although in '96 our meetings did go for four hours! And it was absolutely ridiculous. This year we've got them down to two. And there's been discussion about having three or four people making the most important decisions, or having a selection committee.

JG That's always been rejected.

AB Because everyone wants to be involved, but then again when it comes to day-to-day decision making and reaching deadlines and things like that, people do make the decision with the consensus of three or four others. So not everyone knows what's going on with the whole group all of the time.

SB I was wondering about communication, do you have a notice board?

JG We have meetings fortnightly.

SB Oh right, that's really regular, incredibly so.

AB I think it's so necessary when the group is operating in this way.

SB And everyone turns up?

JG Yeah usually.

SB So are these meetings a social centre as well? Or are they just business?

AB That was the problem in '96, there was too much gossip. I think its much more focussed, when we are in meetings now we discuss the meeting, everything is on the agenda. I guess everyone is busy with other stuff. We've been having slide nights, had a few of them this year which have been worthwhile. They are more social events.

SB Do you have a program for these? Those kind of activities sound as though they might be part of the form of the space, we haven't really spoken about that. But the artists talk and then the studios and then the gallery, it's a nice combination of activities.

JG There's no program for the talks, you don't really have to be on the committee, anyone could organise one and get people up to the common room.

AB They have all been quite different groups of people that talk. There are usually three people that talk, the first one was people from First Floor, Lyndal Walker, Leslie Eastman, Daniel von Sturmer and Michael Goldsmith, and so each night has attracted quite different audiences, so we always go.

JG People bring their beers, their drinks and snacks and ask questions.

AB And I think its a really interesting way to see an overview of peoples work, people you know and people you don't know, because even if you've known someone for four or five years through studying with them, seeing their work presented in a half hour more formal way is

SB It carries a different sort of weight, doesn't it?



AB And everyone who's presented seems to have found it a really rewarding experience in locating themselves now and how they got there.

SB It seems like an informal approach is something that is quite special to Grey Area and that in other spaces all these events are a much bigger deal, whereas with you it's personable and relaxed.

AB I think that also that's definitely at the forefront, but it sometimes can belie the seriousness with which people approach these things. All the presenters at the slide nights have obviously put a good deal of effort in choosing what they've wanted to present. They've talked for half an hour in a really concise and considered way and as an audience member it's really enjoyable to experience that amount of effort being put into your personal practice. The thing about Grey Area we wanted from the start, was energising your personal practice and keeping going as an artist, because we had seen that people were having once they left university.

JG Leaving, finding another studio.

SB It's really putting yourselves in there, which is something that's so easy not to do. That incredibly difficult first year out of art school, Grey Area and the studios are the best solution to the isolation of individual practice after having the support system at the school. You've created, not a communal practice but a way of at least maintaining those connections.

AB It's been a huge learning curve, it's been amazing.