



Home is where the art is: the rise of home-based galleries

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The last ten years have seen the rise of a new phenomenon in the exhibition and sale of contemporary art in Australia – the home gallery. Positioned between the costly and sometimes rigid model of the commercial gallery and the let-it-all-hang-out freedom of artist-run-spaces, home galleries offer an alternative viewing environment/model in which artists, curators or gallerists can display new bodies of work, or more typically combine the work of several artists, usually unrepresented.

Displaying art in a domestic environment is nothing new. Most art is made to be lived with, at home. And artists have often exhibited their art in a home context, a kind of off-Broadway try-out for new work, playing to a sympathetic audience of friends, family and fellow artists. Enlightened patrons have also sometimes filled this role by providing exhibition space at home. Nowadays, the home gallerist is more likely to be an enthusiast, curator or would-be-gallerist without the financial wherewithal, or interest, to stump up for the premises, staff and stable of a regular commercial gallery – but with passion and enthusiasm to find and exhibit new artists and works that may have been overlooked.

One of the earliest home galleries of the current crop was Dudespace, started by Melbourne artist Geoff Newton in 2002. As a student at Canberra School of Arts (CSA, now ANU School of Art) in the late 1990s, Geoff staged several ad hoc art events. One was an exhibition in his garage, advertised as a garage sale. The art was made from garage sale materials, and his idea was to mix up the two audiences, artists and garage sale shoppers. He got quite a shock when the first visitor knocked on the door at 6am.

Moving to Melbourne, he rented a house in Cassels Road, Brunswick with fellow CSA graduates Justin Andrews and Bryan Spier. He started to attend openings and was surprised that young artists in Melbourne did not talk about art or their practice. So he decided to do a show at home to break down the formality of regular openings, and Dudespace was born.

The 'space' was the spare room. Shows ran one day or night only, usually on a Sunday, with a hand-written catalogue. Each exhibition included a barbecue, with Geoff and the artist going 50/50 on beer and sausages. This indicates another attraction of home galleries – the way they can bring together an audience of peers to consider the work in a friendly, even convivial atmosphere. As Geoff says: 'People didn't have to put on the kind of social graces they did at a proper opening. They weren't under flouro lights.'

Artist Danielle Freakley gives an amusing account of how you got a show at Dudespace, complete with a killer impersonation of Geoff Newton:

It was like, I walked in and there was everyone drinking beer and eating sausages. I loved it. I said to Geoff, 'How do you get a show here?' And he said, 'Dude, you ask me'. So I said, 'Dude, can I have a show?', and he said, 'Dude, of course'.

Artists who showed at Dudespace included Tony Garifalakis, Matthew Griffin, A Constructed World, Juan Ford and many others. Geoff particularly remembers a challenging exhibition by Anastasia Klose and Aslan McLelland, and a 'heartfelt and thoughtful' Lizzie Newman event that spread through the



whole house and included a Newman family gathering in the backyard, listening to a mobile phone broadcast from Lizzie's daughter playing onstage at Federation Square.

In retrospect, Geoff sees Dudespace as 'a testing ground, a space between the studio and the gallery'. No-one ever bought anything, but it gave him the opportunity to exhibit a group of artists that he mostly still works with. He's also chuffed that by the final shows in 2006, a lot of the neighbourhood was turning up to see the art, meet people and enjoy the beer and sausages.

But he's reluctant to make great claims for it. In the end, Geoff says, 'Dudespace did follow the gallery model – three walls and carpet. It would have been more interesting to start a space, say, on a train, not working within the system.' Or do as Danielle Freakley did in her contemporaneous project Artist Running Space, in which she made and wore a suit that turned her person into a portable gallery, on whose 'walls' she exhibited the works of other artists, usually in public spaces.

Some time later Geoff teamed up with gallerist Tristian Koenig to open a 'proper' gallery, Neon Parc, now one of Melbourne's premier spaces for younger artists. But the informality, enthusiasm and conviviality of Dudespace remains, is in fact one of the great attractions of a visit to Neon Parc.

At the same time Dudespace was starting in Melbourne, Sydney artists Jay Balbi and Elizabeth Pulie ran Front Room, which was just that – the front room of their three-storey house in inner-city Chippendale. It provided an intimate venue for artists, many without commercial representation such as Sarah Goffman, Christopher Dean, Mary Teague and John Spiteri, to try out new work for a mixed audience. It had a strong inclusive ethos, as Elizabeth describes:

At the end of every opening my partner Jay Balbi would go around to all those left and invite them into the house for dinner, regardless of how many people that meant we ended up hosting. Therefore at one of our dinners you could end up sitting next to and sharing a meal with a student, a sailor, a builder, or an academic, but most probably an artist – we didn't discriminate or exclude, and this was important to us and the gallery's ideology.

Across town in Lilyfield, artist/collector/gallerist Peter Fay ran exhibitions in his garage and house through the decade. Much of it was work by outsider artists Peter discovered and wanted to bring to wider attention. Later in the decade, he operated in a



number of other people's spaces, as a kind of itinerant gallerist with hand-written invitations and very short runs. As has been noted by National Gallery of Australia curator Deborah Hart, Peter's house was a perpetual home gallery – a kind of aesthetic laboratory where new discoveries were installed immediately to be viewed and considered.

One of the limiting factors in a home gallery can be the size of the space available. Dudespace, Front Room and several others operated under severe space restrictions. But for Melbourne's Fehily family, self-confessed 'crazy collectors', the solution was simple – to convert the loft of the family home into a stylish and roomy exhibition space.

Lisa and Ken Fehily began collecting contemporary art in 2000, and it changed their lives. By 2010 they knew they wanted to run a gallery. They launched Fehily Contemporary at the Melbourne Art Fair in August 2010, knowing that their gallery building in Collingwood would not be ready until mid-2011. In the interim they set up Fehily Temporary as a short-term space in their home.

The idea was that several of the gallery's artists (Ricky Maynard, Veronica Kent, Richard Lewer, Ms&Mr, Mel Bassin and Patrick Pound) could have a solo exhibition there, in which they displayed new work alongside their preparatory materials and other things that related to the work. They also spent many hours in the gallery talking to visitors, and each gave scheduled talks about their work. It was somewhere between an exhibition and a residency.

For Lisa Fehily, 'you can do things differently at home. Showing there opens things up a little – it is less intimidating and more welcoming than the white cube model. It's important to greet people, give them a drink, talk to them and empower them to just wander around.' People did buy work, she says. One advantage was that they could see how the artwork would feel in a home.

Also running in Melbourne since 2008 is Hell Gallery, a room built onto the Richmond home of Jess Johnson and Jordan Marani, artists who also work in art installation. The space is available for exhibitions, but it is the performances and parties for which Hell is best known. They must be *really* good parties because word of them even filtered through to London, where the Tate Modern invited Hell to participate in *No soul for sale*, the first international survey of informal gallery spaces, held in early 2010.

A different imperative motivates Adelaide freelance curator Vivonne Thwaites, whose gallery artroom5 occupies a large side room in her house in Henley Beach. Trained as a painter and printmaker, Vivonne later worked at the Art Gallery of Western Australia and for the Australia Council. From 1990-2000 she curated Artspace, the visual arts venue at the Adelaide Festival Centre and was later curator of the South Australian School of Art (SASA) Gallery. Over the last decade she has independently curated a series of exhibitions for South Australian university and art school galleries in which material from museum collections and archives is re-interpreted by contemporary artists.

Vivonne first showed artists at home as part of the Adelaide Festival Fringe in 2004. As The Occasional Gallery, it was launched with a show called *Real. Not real*, curated by artist Dawn Kanost and featuring Marc de Jong, James Lynch, Sarah





Crowest, Fergus Binns and Akira Akira. Later that year came another exhibition, with James Cochran, Alan Tucker and Helen Fuller. It began again in earnest in 2008, with six to eight shows a year in two or three clusters.

Vivonne started artroom5 out of 'frustration at the many good artists with nowhere to show'. It also gave her the opportunity to practice her craft: 'I had curated Artspace for many years, had been an independent curator, and had run the SASA Gallery. So I think I needed to keep doing shows, as a kind of personal expression, and to keep in touch with artists', of whom she knows many:

I follow their work ... I can see potential early. I am quite aware that sometimes I am showing people a bit early, i.e., they still have a way to go, but I feel I can participate a bit in directing an artist's practice, encourage a certain vein in their work, show them with complementary artists ... Sometimes I do a thematic show, for example the one about art coordinators in Indigenous communities, which came about because I did a trip out to some communities with ceramicist Gus Clutterbuck.¹

As in most home galleries, selling work is a not a priority for Vivonne, therefore financing the space is always a struggle.

I have put considerable amounts of my own funds into it. I only occasionally sell. I take minimal commission. I know it's ridiculous but I don't charge the artists anything [for the space, etc.]. In 2010 I was going to close and Arts SA funded me to keep it open.

Many areas of the house are now used, including the garden, verandah, lounge and occasionally even one of the bathrooms for film and performance.

The perceptiveness and curatorial rigour of its director have made artroom5 a true discovery venue, one of the very few in Australia. It would be no surprise to see several of the artists who have exhibited there, such as embroiderer Sera Waters and painter Brigid Noone, show up in future editions of the MCA's annual new art survey, *Primavera*.

Perhaps this is the real reason for the proliferation of home galleries. State galleries have never really seen their role as supporting new art, while the need to make a profit can undermine the ability of even adventurous commercial galleries to give new artists and new work a chance. Even artist-run-initiatives, whose *raison d'être* is new art, are necessarily uneven and unfocussed.

Home galleries on the other hand can be light on their feet, sensitive to new developments and able to act as advocates for new art and artists who are not yet ready to sign onto the commercial treadmill. And because the people running them are generally experienced, they bring a curatorial focus, confidence and willingness to experiment in the presentation of new art. We in the rest of the art world owe these passionate gallerists a debt of gratitude for giving over their houses, their lives and their disposable incomes to create a space and a context for new art.

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