Olivia Porgand in conversation with Tess Maunder and Laura Brown
(CURATORS FOR THE VISUAL ART DEPARTMENT, BRISBANE EMERGING ART FESTIVAL 2012)

I first became interested in the Brisbane Emerging Art Festival when I heard about its mission statement – to make creativity and the arts (encompassing the work of emerging practitioners in Music, Fashion, Visual Arts and more) accessible to a wider Brisbane audience, and not just to engage with the usual interested audiences. As well as this, there's the idea that art can be fun – and whilst being fun, maintain its criticality. These conversations fit into what is being attempted by independent creative hubs and art institutions alike – perhaps in response to the theory of the experience economy as championed by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore.

In the 21st century making art accessible is the aim of the game – and the Brisbane Emerging Art Festival 2012 joins this chorus. In October I caught up with Tess Maunder and Laura Brown, curators of the Visual Arts section of the festival, to discuss their approach to curating within this context.

**Olivia Porgand:** The artist call-out – how many people were interested this year? How many submissions did you get? What sort of quality were they? Were they diverse, did you notice a lot of digital media, or paintings – what was the focus for a lot of artists?

**Laura Brown:** We did get quite a lot of call outs this year. I don't think there would have been a specific leaning towards medium – the challenge tends more to be how resolved an artist’s body of work is, how much thought and maturity is involved.

**OP:** Is that what people would generally do? Would they identify their work as a painting and that's what they were submitting their work as? Or did they identify more as cross-disciplinary and "this is a whole combination of 'stuff'" that they work in.

**Tess Maunder:** Most people I saw in the submissions just referred to themselves as a 'practitioner': someone who works across different things within their practice, but there were a few who did say particularly 'I am a painter', or 'I am an installation artist, video artist'; they had developed what they specifically focus on.

**LB:** I've got two points. I think because the kind of artists we were looking for – more resolved, mature, work that has developed its own voice, or its own context. That's more the context or category that we approach the work with. It's not trying to be everything any more – that's maybe what you do when you're first starting out.

**OP:** So maybe not so much process based stuff, or experimental things, but more formed ideas that might engage in those sorts of discussions?
LB: That’s not quite what we mean – it isn't so much to do with the content or medium of their work as how they approach their work and how they think. That was one of the things we had in our minds when choosing artists. You can usually tell an artist's work because they have a certain way of approaching it.

TM: ... And the result can be both conceptual and material based. So it might not necessarily be that their practice isn't experimental or process-based, but rather that they're focusing on something – whether that be a conceptual thing they're exploring, or be it that they're exploring painting in-depth – something that they've honed in on.

LB: It could be a certain concept that they're really interested in, and that could be worked across different mediums...

OP: Have there been parameters put on the artists, perhaps even physically due to the size of the space?

LB: To be honest, we're intent on ignoring all of that and choosing the artists first, and then dealing with any issues later. We're not interested in restricting or compromising the work.

TM: I think one of the most worthwhile things, in our position, is developing those discussions, and have the chance for two-directional feedback with the artists (if they are willing). For me, to work on a project, that's one of the things I find most interesting.

OP: The next thing I hoped to discuss was this idea of being a ‘slasher’ – so being an artist slash curator, and how that works in this context, or in any context? Are there certain parameters that you work within?

TM: Well, it can be a complex concern, but in this context the important thing is not to double-dip with what you're doing, in the sense that if you're curating a project, not to put your own work in it. This applies to writing too. Of course, when you curate the show you may write a curatorial statement to go along with it, but I think also it's good to have a writer who's going to be critical and reflective about your curatorial choices. Even though you do work in these different forms, you don't have to be doing them simultaneously across on project. So that's how I approach my rules of production.

LB: I believe a person can have different areas of practice, and there are several great examples of people who have successfully achieved this. But like Tess has discussed, it is incredibly pertinent to understand what your position actually is. There otherwise could exist a major conflict of interest. For me, putting your own work into your own show is lazy and surpasses the point. It's wonderful when information from varying areas of practice intersect and can bring to light interesting conversations, but this would be the point at which it becomes too overlapping.

OP: Is it maybe, rather than lazy, is it maybe an ego thing? If you're specifically interested in archiving, and you're doing a survey exhibition of artists who have worked in archiving, does putting yourself in there then identify yourself as one of the top ten artists who have focused on archiving? Maybe it's an ego thing, or maybe it's even logical – if you're really interested
in something in your practice, then that's where your best knowledge base is.

LB: Then someone else should have a show of just your work. You're curating a show about this idea, but this idea stems from your own work — so realistically your show is about your own work, and you just put another bunch of work with it.

TM: I think a lot of the time it's a status thing.

LB: This is true for almost all things.

OP: Final two questions — I wanted to touch on ARIs in Brisbane, because I guess the Brisbane Emerging Art Festival is functioning within that broader conversation as its context. What is the state of ARI's or these collective communities in Brisbane?

TM: It is apparent that there are things like this happening across the world all the time — and these collective communities that emerge from shared interests. It's entrepreneurship in the sense that they just want to do it and they do.

LB: If we would like to differentiate Brisbane from other communities across Australia, I would suggest that Brisbane being considerably smaller in size could actually be its strong point. This being because the sense of community and engagement is made more intense as everything is closer.

OP: One of the good things about the Brisbane Emerging Art Festival and the overarching idea of it — is this relevance and emergence to a wider community other than just the arts community hub, where everyone knows each other and we see each other at openings. It seems to be opening up to a wider audience.

LB: Yes, and this has made for a very interesting dynamic to work within. The need to appeal to both a critical art audience and the broader public who might be at the event for the music or fashion.

TM: Another part of the dynamic is that there will be all these things happening in one space at one time — an interesting energy and interaction between not just the various areas but their varying audiences.

OP: My last question, I would like to find out how you've curatorially structured your approach, considering the almost strange nature that the festival is structured. It is considerably different to the typical exhibition.

LB: It's structured as a kind of 'survey'. We began by choosing the artists that we felt were more significant first, only later drawing out any common threads that might exist between the works.

TM: We didn't begin with a particular theme in mind; we didn't want to impose on our selection of artists. It's an interesting process, finding the commonalities later on and having to be very meticulous with how we map the works and the experience.