



SpeedDating-4-Artists

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Arts Northern Rivers was one of the last regional arts boards to be established in NSW. It was set up in 2003 for everybody working in the arts but immediately it was just inundated with requests for assistance from visual artists. They were crying out for it. We have the highest regional concentration of artists in Australia – 1,500 professional practising artists. Lois Randall, our CEO, applied for funding to set up Visual Arts Network to support artists in developing their careers. The speed-dating idea came about to help the artists meet gallery directors.

One of the major difficulties of living here is how to create relationships with big galleries. The local galleries are saturated and there's not really much opportunity to sell your work locally. There are no buyers. It can be really hard to connect with galleries in the cities where the buyers actually are, because the directors are always really busy and they obviously get submissions from artists all the time. Most of them have a full stable, so it's not like they're having trouble finding artists. We've found though that if we can manage to get them here, in this format, often they'll find someone they like. It works.

We put people together for just four minutes. Normally we have 12 gallery directors and 36 artists and each artist who comes along gets to meet with six of the gallery directors. They'll bring a portfolio and it's good to have some kind of physical object, like a small work if possible. Some of them will bring laptops but that can add to the stress of the situation when they don't work. That's why I always advise people to bring a portfolio instead. I mean it's pretty full on having to sell yourself in four minutes (I don't know whether I'd like it) and obviously it is stressful. The directors get nervous, too, but I don't think the artists realise that!

Four minutes doesn't seem a long time but it's long enough for the directors to know whether they have any interest at all in following up, and short enough not to feel trapped! A lot of the time, it's just not the right fit for that particular gallery. If there's a spark, the artist will leave their card and say, 'Can I pop in sometime and see you?' Or the gallery director might say, 'Keep me up to date with what you're doing.' And even though it is quick, there's time for a bit of feedback for the artist. Like 'You're not right for me, but maybe you could try this gallery? Or maybe you should enter this prize.'

The artists mainly love it. They think it's great. An excellent opportunity. Some find it difficult. And now that I've organised a few of them, I can at least let people know what they're in for. I mean, obviously there have been some cases where that quick show-and-tell hasn't suited

their personality type at all. We have a sort of informal networking afterwards and in the end, everyone feels fine.

The gallery owners have really loved it as well. For the regional gallery directors, it introduces them to a whole heap of artists who they haven't necessarily had time to meet and who they might include in later shows. And for the commercial gallery directors? Well, they just never get to meet that quantity of artists.

Of course, you can't run them too often. You can't use up the goodwill because it's a big call. What you're doing is ringing someone up and saying, 'Hi, do you want you to drive down from Brisbane for a day?' It's amazing though how willing everyone has been. Robyn Sweaney, an artist from Mullumbimby, met the manager of Tim Olsen Gallery speed-dating and has had a successful solo show at the Tim Olsen Gallery in Sydney. That's been very exciting.

Speed-dating is just one aspect of the Visual Arts Network. We also do curatorial panels. They were more intensive feedback sessions for artists where they get to sit down with, say, three curators and talk about their work and get intensive feedback. And we've run a lot of professional development training and seminars too. Things like educating artists about tax, how to approach a gallery, legal issues, dealing with the media. All that type of thing. Because artists don't really learn that. Even if they've been to uni, there just isn't time for all that business stuff in the course.

The website has been a massive promotional tool. Artists can edit their own pages, put up new images and it provides a single point of contact. For example when the ABC was sourcing ideas for *Painting Australia* they contacted us and said 'We're looking for artists to do this television show and we reckon you'd have some up there, wouldn't you?' And I said, 'Go to the website. Tell us which ones you want to know more about and we'll recommend a few.'

It really makes the difference.



ABOVE:
Jeni Allenby with local artist Karlee Rawkins and Ishta Wilson (foreground) at a VAN Curatorial Panel
PHOTO: JEFF DAWSON

RIGHT:
The line-up at Speed Dating 07 at Linnaeus Estate
PHOTO: JEFF DAWSON

