



Installation View: NWEB 'let me sit in the corner, I've just turned Zero' VCA Student Gallery September 2019

INTERVIEW

Sandie Bridie Interviews NWEB (Hugo Blomley & Clara Joyce)

Conversation between Sandie Bridie, Hugo Blomley and Clara Joyce, coordinators of NWEB at their exhibition Let me sit in the corner, I've just turned zero, at the Student Gallery VCA, September 2019

Sandra Bridie: Hugo and Clara, how did NWEB project come about and where was it located?

Clara: NWEB started in first semester first year, when a girl Tessa dropped out and Hugo and I asked Lisa Radford if we could set up a temporary gallery in the student's space in the Painting Department. It was just an empty studio and then we ran that for a year and a half. It started off on a one-week basis and originally the rules were no solo shows. We would hang them on a Monday, take them down on a Friday. Then it evolved to having solo shows –

Hugo: – then we accidentally had a solo show and we realised that that wasn't such a bad thing.

What was the reason why you didn't want solo shows initially?

Hugo: There wasn't really a logic behind it apart from the fact that we thought it would be nice to have shows that were based on two people coming together, two practices coming together and seeing what happened.

Clara: I think we've always had a focus on collaboration – we are attracted to unlikely pairings between artists.

And it might have meant that they come up with something new for your space, rather than just putting something straight out of their studios onto the walls of the NWEB space.

Hugo: There was always the potential for that, I think.

And so, you had a solo exhibition in the space, how did you accommodate that? How did that change your ideas for the space?

INTERVIEW | NWEB | Interview with Hugo Blomley & Clara Joyce by Sandie Bridie

Hugo: I think that was the point at which we moved away from the first idea of what we wanted NWEB to be and to let it expand itself. We started having shows with more than two people, and solo shows. We gave the project more agency to let it do its thing.

So, you were given this opportunity to run a small gallery amongst the studios in the Painting Department, but did you have a schema or an ideology that you applied to it, or an expectation apart from privileging collaboration? Or, did you find your concept after the first two or three shows?

Hugo: I think we wanted something that was different from what there was, but beyond that we didn't have a plan. It came with the space as we learnt about our limitations, its limitations, we could start to build it from there, but we had to find those first.

Clara: I think it has also evolved from quite a naïve conception – first year/first semester and it's been quite a modest growth experience for us. Originally, setting that strict rule of no solo shows, then having shows where the agency was completely diffused and people were just storing items in there and documenting that as a show, then giving complete agency over to an artist, saying you can do a solo show – it almost creates more freedom than saying no solo shows. It has been a growing thing for Hugo and me. NWEB has definitely awkwardly become a different thing from when it started.

I think locating it as one of the studios, there is almost no expectation it is the reverse of that. That thing of it being used as a storage space playing out a trial, a draft of an idea. That sort of informality brings some interesting projects into the space, almost non-projects. It's the opportunity to step back from an idea, isolate it and see where it goes.

Hugo: Yes, definitely.

Clara: It's also that different concept of space within all the painting studios, we were interested in the idea of it being a heterotopia, like this different type of space within this big institution. It's like a tiny little space of difference, I guess. *Did you both exhibit in the space? Did you see it as a space that you might be able to build up a folio and your CV, as a self-interested ARI project?*

Hugo: The inaugural show was us. I think that was partly because when we asked Lisa if we could have the space our work was already in there. And when she said yes, we thought, well let's organise this properly. But since then we have avoided putting our own work in there.

Clara: I have put a painting or two in group shows.

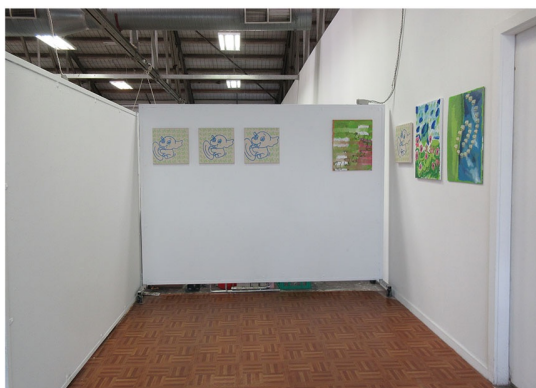
You've curated shows?

Hugo: It has become a project about authorship, our authorship opposed to artwork – we have had a very heavy hand in everything –

Clara: We have, we really have –



As they were (Nearly).
Curated by Hugo Blomley &
Clara Joyce, NWEB 2018



Jieun Ha and Kostas Pavlidis,
'Perhaps Walter Benjamin's most
well known essay, "The Work of Art
in the Age of Mechanical
Reproduction," identifies the
perceptual shift that takes place
when technological advancements
emphasize speed and
reproducibility', NWEB, 2019

INTERVIEW | *NWEB* | Interview with Hugo Blomley & Clara Joyce by Sandie Bridie

Hugo: But our work hasn't been in it.

Would you say you have a style, how would you sum up your aesthetic?

Clara: Definitely, I think we do. Hugo and I – where we lay it is where it will go generally, so it is quite fast, quite intuitive. I think inevitably there is going to be a style. I think Hugo and I are quite similar in the way we approach curating and installing things.

You are probably finding your language together because it is so emerging.

Clara: I think our language is a bit like: 'Yep, nope, a little to the left'.

So fairly exacting! This is the first year of NWEB, how has the project run differently in the first six months to the second six months?

Hugo: The year started with a residency that we had got some funding for, so already it is sounding a bit more professional than we realised. But then when we came to setting up the space again, we had a different space, not only did we have a different space, we had the prime space. So, you walk up the stairs to the Painting Studio and we are right there at the top of the stairs. The first iteration of NWEB was in a corridor of the studios.

Where was it situated within that corridor?

Hugo: The second or third studio down, so you had to actually go down that aisle to find it, whereas now we are front and centre. We are now an entity and we are seen – every time we had a show it was seen, and people were noticing it, which is different for us.

Clara: It definitely was pushed into a position of more exposure.

And that was Raaf encouraging you, wasn't it?

Clara: We didn't necessarily ask for that, it almost made us feel like we were privileged. We did get some resistance from other students.

Hugo: Yes, it felt like a bias, with students thinking, why should you get that space, why can't we all get 20 centimetres more space?

Clara: It's a fair enough question.

Hugo: Yes, we are taking away time and space from those other students, which has always been something to be aware of, not to push it and to be aware of the facts that we owe our dues, as well.

SB: How many shows have you had to date, and Clara how do you see the project now that you are living in Perth and you have this exhibition in the Student Gallery at the VCA? At what point are you in the project? Is it a culmination, or is it a step along the way?

Clara: I definitely see it as a project that will continue for many years, I hope.

SB: So, this exhibition is like a two year anniversary. Like an early decade celebration!

INTERVIEW | *NWEB* | Interview with Hugo Blomley & Clara Joyce by Sandie Bridie

Hugo: Yes, but I don't think it was ever meant to be one thing. When we started we were pretty clear about the fact that it was a node opposed to a space, we gave it as much freedom as it needed. It is nice to get outside of what we were and do something new and we have more projects on the horizon that will be off site again, which will be exciting.

SB: What do you mean by 'node' in describing your project?

Hugo: A 'node', an intersection, a point where things can come together, things can be filtered through, like the Anthology of *NWEB*. We become this point of flux, which is exciting for us.

Clara: Also, it's non-hierarchical. I imagine it to be like a network and there is one node and there are many other spaces and nodes. I think this comes back to our insecurity about having all these privileges, that we never wanted to assert too much.

SB: But then, anyone else could set up a space too, there could be project spaces in each department or studio, you could create a network.

Clara: We would absolutely love that; it would be so sick.

Hugo: That would be amazing.

SB: They used to have the Black Hole in the Drawing Department; do they still have that? It was at the top of the stairs at the northern entrance of the first floor of this building. It was a small storeroom, I guess that had the door removed and was painted black inside. It was a very effective black hole because it really did suck the light in there. I guess it is up to other students to assert their right to use a space or just find themselves using a space that is just sitting there.

Clara: I think students are accepting the nature of *NWEB* more, there is less resistance. I think this show has been really nice, we have had a lot of engagement, probably the most we have ever had with the project. People are naturally helping out, putting forward work and ideas.

SB: I was about to ask about the reception from the beginning to now amongst your colleagues.

Hugo: I think it has warmed up a bit.

Clara: Definitely.

SB: So, initially they were a bit envious?

Clara: It's a bit like Australia.

Hugo: It's tall poppy syndrome.

Clara: We are like that too, it's only natural, I think.

Hugo: But I think coming back to that point about people coming to help us in this show, what was so nice about it was being able to go back and work with people who had had shows at *NWEB* in the past, but also to reach out to people in the artworld and have *NWEB* as a platform behind us to legitimise us and start that conversation, which has been really cool with this show because we have been able to access works that we are really excited about, but we wouldn't have otherwise had.

SB: So, who within this current exhibition are past exhibitors with NWEB? Who has been invited from outside of your past program?

INTERVIEW | *NWEB* | Interview with Hugo Blomley & Clara Joyce by Sandie Bridie

Clara: There's Savannah, Nicola, me.

Hugo: Yes, four artists out of the twelve are from the program, three or four of those are from outside of the university, one or two works are from the Potter collection and a couple are from other departments around the university, and one from RMIT, as well.

SB: What was the thinking about the content of this exhibition?

Clara: Our starting point was an anchor point with the two paintings from the VCA archives, they almost set the tone and a lot of the work has been chosen in relation to those works. It became about balancing what we have with what else we can get; a very natural process. The show hasn't been curated in a way that has a lot of heavy conceptual tension. It is a lot more emotive and quite restrained; I think. We wanted to keep it very restrained and not overhung and not too big, because I feel like we wanted to do something different with the space, it has a certain tone from the group shows of departments you usually see in this space.

SB: It has a nice spaciousness.

Hugo: It's a tricky space though at the same time, it's a very voluminous space and it's a very light filled space, but you have four walls and a big void in the middle.

SB: It's a lot prettier than it used to be, there are new plaster board walls so you can actually hang on the walls.

Hugo: Yeah, well they used to have brick walls and now they are plasterboard.

SB: And the floor used to be pretty splattered, so they must paint it up every once in a while. So, it looks more like a conventional gallery space than a student space.

Hugo: It's a very legitimate gallery space, which is very weird because we haven't dealt with that before. It's hard to navigate it because you don't have anything to inform – with *NWEB* and the residency we had all these restrictions informing what we did, which are so useful because you get in here and you are held so accountable for your decisions.

SB: And you can't help but think about it all more aesthetically, as a traditional gallery exhibition. You might as well go with this rather than against it or work out how you are going to sully the space. They are more rhetorical restrictions more than anything else.

Have there been any disasters, things you have learnt with the project, or things that you have looked at and thought, nah, we won't look for that in the future?

Clara: I think it is always negotiating this role of authorship, we are very new to this and so when someone gives us a work, how much agency do they have in terms of installing it in the space, how much agency do we have? It has been quite gently just trying to see where we lay and where other people lay as well. It's really new to us. We had a bit of trouble with a few younger artists feeling self-conscious about the works. We are trying to soothe people into feeling confident about having their work, I guess in such a stark space.

SB: And with your own space in the painting department, did you feel you needed to manage some of your artist's anxiety, at all?

Clara: That space was a lot more relaxed, people felt naturally relaxed.

Hugo: Everything felt very transitory in there. You put it in here and everything is very final, whereas in there it was a working space.

INTERVIEW | *NWEB* | Interview with Hugo Blomley & Clara Joyce by Sandie Bridie

YSB: So, in this show there is anxiety about the vertical work, how about the other works?

Hugo: I think we have had anxieties about the show, but that has come from us worrying about making decisions rather than anyone coming to us with problems.

Clara: There is quite a neurotic theme to this exhibition, I think. These two figurative paintings, and then the guy who made this pole, it looks like a pole-dancing pole!

SB: Years ago, there was a student in the Painting Department who was a pole-dancer.

Clara: I think there have also been some strange themes emerging, there's a female police officer, then there's _____'s drawing with the cheques, and then there's ...

SB: But the second you start to install a number of works you are going to see echoes. It is interesting what colour themes emerge etc.

Clara: It all just goes through the network and gets filtered.

Hugo: It was interesting, because we didn't request any work specifically. We contacted artists that we liked and said we wanted a work and they brought works in for us. Yesterday it was like these presents came in. Things started making sense really quickly.

SB: But it is the way you hang them as well. As you install them there is a placed-ness about where things end up going. What do you feel is your relationship to past artist's projects within your knowledge of the history of artist-led projects in Melbourne, at least?

Hugo: I think that's a tough question to answer at this stage, because we are babies, really.

SB: I am sure a lot of staff and other artists have been throwing material at you as soon as they see you working in this way. They want to contextualise it for you.

Hugo: It feels like the right time to be doing it, especially with the new Collingwood Arts Precinct opening, it feels like artist-run spaces in Melbourne are going in a very specific direction. So, it feels like a nice time to be offering something else.

SB: And what would you say the 'something else' is that you are offering?

Hugo: It feels a little less bureaucratic. It would be nice to go back to everything having a bit of a disaster and having everything about to fall apart.

Clara: With a lot of younger voices and people from a different generation, I think naturally it will be different. By the very nature of the world that we grew up in and the way we relate to art.

SB: I think Melbourne is probably a bit different to Sydney, even, or in Britain, in that in real estate artist's spaces have been relatively secure in their location, admittedly everyone is paying more and more for the hire of their spaces, but in Melbourne the occupation of spaces is a lot less fugitive. They are not setting up in an area, almost as a pop-up space, and then the real estate agents decide to shaft them once the space is attractive enough to rent out to someone who will pay more. I am not saying that this does not happen in Melbourne, it is just that the occupation of spaces is not so fleeting as to seem fugitive and as a condition of the sector. These conditions may make the Melbourne spaces seem more secure and acquire more conventional trappings of a 'gallery' based on the commercial gallery, rather than a guerrilla occupation. In my experience, it very quickly went from an experimental one-day-show kind of idea that was very provisional to places establishing an idea of who they were, which became more and more constrained over time

INTERVIEW | *NWEB* | Interview with Hugo Blomley & Clara Joyce by Sandie Bridie

and then the professionalism of running these spaces came in as the university courses in curatorial studies abounded and as the spaces found funding bodies to support their spaces. A dependency was built, you were required to become professional to get funding to keep that space going.

Hugo: Yes, people having to turn to funding bodies to keep things alive and being held accountable to the bodies. It is a really hard space, because we need the money, but it comes at a price.

SB: It can calcify the thing.

Hugo: We haven't had to deal with that, we have been really lucky.

SB: You have been sheltered here, and that's why each generation of students should have a Clara and Hugo, or each department should have a Clara and Hugo, or a collective or whatever, asserting their right to create their own exhibition or project space.

Clara: Yeah, I think it's nice that we haven't been held accountable, especially in this stage where we have been finding the identity of *NWEB* and it's been gradually growing, not being held accountable to funding, project briefs, or being able to construct our own project briefs has meant that the identity that we have for it is quite innocent, in a way, which I really value.

*SB: For me, it's interesting because when I set up my space, *The Fictional and Actual Artist's Space*, I came back to do my *Masters* to kind of do what you have done, as a project space within an institution – in that bubble, but I had been out and I had been amongst the early generation of people setting up spaces, which was probably like your approach because there wasn't any money, or we weren't seeking funding and we didn't need money to pay for the shows, as well. So, it's a bit of a luxury to ask your mates if they want to try something out.*

Clara: It's an important steppingstone for a lot of younger people, I think, to feel valued but not to have that pressure.

And have there been any people who have been involved in the space who have gone off and wanted to set up something like this themselves?

Hugo: I think we have had people who have definitely wanted to be a part of it, and we have had people who have contributed immensely, but we have always been quite sure that we weren't going to expand the board. It was Clara and I and we run the project, it was our dictatorship, basically, it was an autocracy.

Clara: A lot of freedom.

yes, I think it is good to know what your limits are, what you want to absorb, or not.

Hugo: And we are always really grateful for that help and appreciative of it, but _



Installation Views: *NWEB* 'let me sit in the corner, I've just turned Zero' VCA Student Gallery September 2019

INTERVIEW | *NWEB* | Interview with Hugo Blomley & Clara Joyce by Sandie Bridie

SB: It's ours.

Hugo: Your work is your work, but this project comes in under our autocracy.

SB: And have there been any issues between the two of you?

Hugo: Surprisingly, not yet.

Clara: No, I mean we bicker!

Hugo: Yeah, we bicker like siblings.

Clara: Yeah, but it's pretty harmless.

SB: And so, how do you see it going from here on? You are mid-way through second year now.

Hugo: Halfway through undergrad.

SB: Do you anticipate continuing next year?

Hugo: This project and the next one coming have been offered to us by people, so we haven't had to seek out opportunities.

SB: You are a magnet!

Hugo: But I think it would be good potentially next year to start taking that on, on account of ourselves, searching for projects.

SB: Having your own volition.

Hugo: But I also think there is no regularity or schedule for that, it will be as we think opportunities arise.

Clara: I think, just geographically, me being in Perth and Hugo being in Melbourne, at least until the middle of next year, that will slow things down a bit. I would like Hugo to come and visit Perth over the summer.

SB: It could be a project over there.

Clara: A beach holiday on the cards, Hugo?

Hugo: It could be good.

SB: A beach house exhibition.

Hugo: Ooh yeah, beach art.

SB: The example of John Nixon who is so wonderful, is there, who shows that you don't actually need an audience, in fact it can just be documentation, in your house or rearranging your work in your studio.

Hugo: It did feel like we didn't really have an audience, because you never had openings or points where you would get people concretely watching, it was always that they would walk past.

SB: So, you have no statistics on who has seen the shows?

INTERVIEW | *NWEB* | Interview with Hugo Blomley & Clara Joyce by Sandie Bridie

Clara: I think we have gradually got more audience though through Raaf, he's been funnelling people in to see the shows.

SB: Raaf has?

Clara: Yeah, through putting us at the top of the stairs and giving us this show.

Hugo: And audiences coming, so we haven't had to think about what we have wanted or needed, yet.

SB: Is Raaf's encouragement welcome, or are you finding that burdensome, at all?

Clara: No, I find his guidance really gentle and quite good.

Hugo: He is incredibly supportive.

Clara: And he gives us so much freedom, as well.

Hugo: Sometimes I wonder why he gives us so much freedom.

SB: Well, it is the way he has curated things in the past.

Hugo: Yeah, maybe it's more Raaf's project, it's not really our project!

SB: So you are his proxies!

Hugo: Yeah, yeah, we are his proxies doing his work.

SB: You are his wish fulfilment for what he missed out on in art school. Of course, if you are head of the department then you can play out these ideas of a utopic department with such opportunities for students to create something a bit independently.

Clara: I think it has been really beneficial.

Hugo: But I think the painting department is in a good place at the moment; with the support that he gave us, and I know that they are also getting funding together to start putting out a publication regularly. Unlike any of the other departments around here, the painting department is giving the students more opportunities to take on projects themselves, without necessarily putting it in the hands of the students but making it easier for them to do what we have done

SB: So providing a framework.

Hugo: Yes, and creating a framework to support them, which is not a bureaucratic framework.

SB: Now, were there any questions I have not asked that you thought I might ask? Or is there anything you would like to say?

Clara: I guess the question about the future of NWEB is probably the most nerve racking, or unsettling for me. But I also think the project has a long life-span.

SB: Are you unsettled because of the distance you are at currently, between Perth and Melbourne?

Hugo: When Clara first moved to Perth, we just thought, well that's that.

INTERVIEW | *NWEB* | Interview with Hugo Blomley & Clara Joyce by Sandie Bridie

SB: You thought that was final and NWEB would not continue?

Hugo: We couldn't think of NWEB doing anything else.

SB: Because I remember you saying that you would just close it.

Hugo: We were happy to do that; we didn't feel that we needed to keep going. But then going back to that idea of NWEB being a node and that being interchangeable. I think that this is how it is going to resolve itself.

SB: And then there's always mail art, which is a way of operating.

Hugo: Mail exhibitions ... I want to have an email exhibition. I want to ask people to email the artworks.

Clara: Just an email chain.

Hugo: Yeah, and just print out all these email chains.

SB: Especially with digital technology now, but the mail art exhibition was something that was devised to deal with distance nicely, postcard exhibitions and exhibitions in a suitcase.

Clara: That's very sweet.

SB: I am just throwing some ideas at you.

Hugo: Yeah, it's nice that it fits in a suitcase, opposed to this thing, this big white cube.

Clara: This is definitely the most polished we have been, it's very different for us.

SB: Yes, it's more polished than I expected, actually.

Clara: Really!

SB: It's the scale of it and the fact that you have got these institutional works.

Hugo: God, yeah, nihilism in the Melbourne art world is something that seems to be, I don't know, on trend, but we are just no into it.

Clara: That is something that we are morally opposed to – just not believing in anything – because it is very easy to do. You see it in every year group there are a few reactionary nihilists, who unknowingly devalue a lot of other student's work and belief systems in this very easy approach. That's exactly what we didn't want this show to be and that is why it is so restrained.

SB: I think you need the gallery to be cleaned up and maybe tomorrow or Thursday when you can have some perspective on it and you'll work out what it's about. Meaning comes retrospectively, I reckon. I don't know if at this stage you could clearly work out the show's meaning, except for these little echoes and threads happening.

Website: nweb.club