

In Search of jd

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This project was a search for experimental and contemporary art spaces where emerging artists practice and show their work; my focus was on how alternative spaces support emerging artists and how these spaces survive in a city known for major collections of internationally renowned artists. I have chosen to present my experience as a work of fiction.

The Commission

There I was sitting in the studio, my drop saw officially dead, bandsaw on the blink and I desperately needed more materials. My creative energy was at an all-time low, I hadn't produced anything for weeks. An electricity bill on the workbench was the last straw. The lights were about to go out.

A shadow cast across the window was followed by a knock, more like a drum roll from inside my rusted-out shed.

*Anyone in there?
Who wants to know?*

The geezer was tall and spidery, wearing an old trench coat a couple of sizes too big. Burberry. He said he was some sort of artist, not that I believed him. He was good-looking, he reminded me of the professor who used to live next door.

The geezer knew I had exhibited alongside his son Jimmy in an undergraduate project. The kid had some talent but he partied too much, and it was over a decade ago. Besides, I had no idea who his dad was back then, only that his father had bailed him out once when he was arrested doing a paste up on the back wall of the Old Bar in Lismore. Campus gossip was about how

Jimmy's dad hated the object but they missed the real point: that night Jimmy had posted a really good piece of art.

It all fell into place. This geezer is very well known for flowers and beaches that are reprinted on tee shirts and bed linen, I have even seen his work printed onto socks. It's definitely not art but he has a commercial product and a big, fat bank account. He offered me a \$2000 cash advance, access to his credit card and a contact in Barcelona. He threw in a \$5k performance bonus if I brought his son home. It would have been churlish to refuse.

I opened a bottle of red and invited him to take me through the facts.

He wanted me to find Jimmy who had run away to Spain to make a new life as an artist. Jimmy's mother was originally from Barcelona and the kid spoke Catalan. He had disappeared to make his reputation as an artist away from the spotlight of his famous father and wanted none of the opportunities, introductions or patronage that the rest of us would give an eyetooth for. That's the rub: Jimmy wanted to hide from his father but to the world he wanted to be famous. My mood was improving by the glass: you can't become famous and disappear so I reckoned I was onto a nice little earner.

This assignment could reduce my financial burden and fuel a new artistic direction. It could transform this dusty shed into a happening place. And then maybe, just maybe, I could sell some of the work I had stored under the stairs at my mother's house.

The job did not involve moving molecules but it was my first commission.

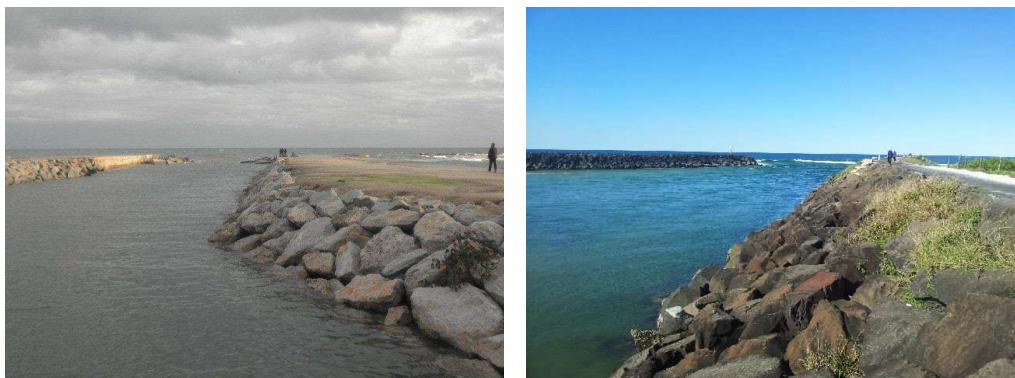
Home away from home

I took a few days to sleep off the journey and to observe local dress and behaviour through my jetlagged fog. A good sleuth needs to pass unnoticed and first impressions are essential. I wore black, carried my shoulder bag 'cross your heart' style and walked with a purpose.

I tried not to stare too intently at sights not seen in Australia, like dogs on public transport, the musical instruments people carried (or were they really weapons inside violin cases?), the shops – even the greengrocers is a work of art – and the inescapable fact that every sight and every street corner is a photo opportunity for this visitor from rural Australia. In Barcelona it is difficult not to turn paparazzi...



Second impressions evoked the Northern Rivers. Its street cafes and gentle aroma of weed, its beaches like Byron's, the breakwater like Brunswick Heads', sports fields and regional art gallery like Lismore's, historic Roman walls like the Macadamia Castle's, and Frank Ghery's Big Fish sculpture which reminded me of the Big Prawn in Ballina.



The breakwaters of Barcelona (left) and Brunswick Heads (right).



The Macadamia Castle



Ghery's Fish (Barcelona) and the Big Prawn (Ballina).

Barcelona has Miró and Picasso museums, we have the Margaret Olley Centre. Some of the similarities were uncanny. After seeing the stairwell at Massana Art School I could have been back at Southern Cross University. I felt right at home.



Massana Art School (left) and Southern Cross Uni Art School (right).

The geezer's contact

The geezer's Barcelona contact turned out to be a Dutch expatriate who I tracked down in the School of Philology on the most historic campus of the University. On entering the portico I was a student again, I could feel myself gaining IQ points with every step.

The contact suggested I look around Consell de Cent street, a cluster of commercial galleries which specialised in various eras, artists and media.

Two galleries sold antiquities, one represented Cuban artists, another dealt in original work of Jean Miro and Alexander Calder, one was closed for a rehang. Only one represented living European artists and, hungry for a sale, its proprietor was effusive about his artists and their work. I pressed home my advantage and he opened his stockroom so I was able to look at every piece.

None were Jimmy's work.

Early leads

I had sent a few speculative emails before leaving Australia and, to my surprise and delight, two had actually answered.

One reply was from a foundation that had been opened for less than a year and with some heavy duty funding behind it. The director was interesting and hospitable; he showed me the backstage areas and explained how exhibitions are mounted. They have one space to exhibit mid-career and established artists who have completed residencies with the foundation, and another for work by more famous artists, drawn from private collections in New York, Mexico, South America and Europe.

The director attends art fairs in Europe and the USA and Asia, both for the official exchange and for 'fringe' events organised by artists who are not represented at the mainstream fair. The team at the foundation invited me to their openings and gave me other leads, but they had not heard of Jimmy, or whatever name he might use.

This was no small, struggling outfit. An artist would have to be well established to be offered a residency, but it gave me a few ideas. Art fairs attract international dealers so why not set up a fringe show around one in Sydney or Melbourne to break into the market? Private foundations are common in the United States and are being established in Europe; however, the only Australian examples seem to be David Walsh at MONA and perhaps John Kaldor. Australia has its fair share of private collectors who might support the concept financially and through loans. Why not investigate the business model of foundations? Maybe set something up?

The other reply was from a Swiss expatriate who operates a small gallery space and studio with a tiny loft arrangement in the Gràcia quarter which offers exhibition and residency space for visiting artists. I headed over for a chat.

Although his operation was very different to the foundation I had visited previously, I found him to be equally friendly and generous with his knowledge. He mentioned that in Barcelona there is relatively little government support for experimental arts and, in times of financial stringency,

experimentation is the first thing to be cut. As a relatively young democracy, Spain does not have a precedent of funding experimental or emerging artists and many artists go elsewhere in Europe to develop their practice.

The Swiss sculptor hadn't heard of Jimmy but he gave me some leads including La Escocesa and L'Hangar, studio spaces over in the Poble Nou area. He suggested my guy could be working as a waiter or labourer, and he also advised me to check out Paris or London.

I left feeling both grateful and miserable. I appreciated their friendship and honesty and while being embarrassed about the paucity of my education in Spanish history, I was also miserable about my poor language skills – the modern European man or woman is bilingual, or even trilingual.

I also had to face up to the reality that the emails I sent before setting off were dead ends. And then there was the awful possibility that Jimmy had flown the coop.

At least the *Rioja* was sensational and cheap and the *tapas* bars gave me regular opportunities to review progress. Fascinating place Barcelona. I was really getting to like it. After having a few successful shows I could apply for a residency here.

Street Art

I never paid much attention to street art. A few local kids regularly tagged the side of my studio but when my parishioner neighbours found it offensive and complained to my landlord I was given an ultimatum. It was me or the graffiti, so the graffiti had to go.

Here in Barcelona there were tags everywhere, but not all of it was graffiti. Some was advertising and some was very well executed art. The first ones I noticed were the local cobbler, barbecue chicken shop and flower markets but my favourites were the humorous ones. There were references to famous images like Rita the Riveter, Hollywood actors or Dickensian literature, and some were just fun. Impressive work. Is it commissioned?



Barcelona's favourite sons live on outside the confines of its museums with tributes to Miro and Picasso, maritime history and personal tags.



Earthy Delights

Rapidly running out of money, I did the only thing open to me as a self-respecting artist: I went AWOL. Perhaps my guy was making tapas in a restaurant - and as a forensic researcher I should follow every hunch. I took what appeared to be the most sensible option for the task: to eat and drink my way across the city. Local food is excellent and it was all very civilised once I got used to long lunches with *vino tinto*. In between meals I visited Gaudi's work: La Sagrada Familia, the Guell Park, La Pedrera and La Casa Batlló. Breathtaking, visionary and joyful, I loved it.

Even if I returned to Australia without Jimmy I was not going to leave Spain without seeing all the major collections. For the next few weeks I lived the dream, soaking up the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya MNAC, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona CCCB, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona MACBA, Antoni Tàpies Foundation, Miró Foundation, Picasso

Museum and La Capella in Barcelona, the Dali Museum in Figueres, the Prado and Reina Sofia in Madrid and even the Guggenheim in Bilbao.

My recollections were hazy. Alone in an upstairs gallery of the Prado I was moved to tears by the joy and beauty of the renaissance and simultaneously run over by a stampede of bored French schoolchildren. Perched on scaffolding, a team was installing a Sol LeWitt at the Reina Sofia. There was a video screening at the MNAC explaining the technique for lifting murals from walls and attaching them to other surfaces. Fascinating stuff these physical conservation techniques, and they could come in handy for lifting street art off the walls. I had often wondered how Banksy's work could have been removed from its location in London and offered at Sotheby's in New York... and now I knew.

My pick was a group show at la Capella and the work of Christina de Middel who documented a story of Zambian Afronoughts, cats in space and too much lovemaking. Art as a flight of fantasy, unless, of course, the Zambians really did have a space program.

The Guggenheim reminded me of a theme park with big gates, an imposing puppy or spider, a tribute to monumentalism and patronage. Its work is shipped between New York, Venice, Bilbao and Abu Dhabi. Guggenheim is a brand, is this the direction art is taking? I used to love big minimalism but now I'm not too sure. My ideas are changing.

Around Poble Nou

Back in Barcelona I took up residence in an attic: single bed, desk, lamp and shared facilities. Four floors up without a lift and winter was upon us. If Gràcia is the Carlton of Barcelona, Poble Nou is its St Kilda. Open, close to the port, with run down factories that are gradually being gentrified. Poble Nou is where the Swiss artist had suggested I look for Jimmy.

I found The Hangar down an alley behind a crumbling wall and past a rusty gate. Heaven for street artists and spray-can kids alike. It housed a few start-up digital marketing and media companies and offered some electronic equipment and print facilities. Not what I was looking for.

The Escocesa wasn't far away and it seemed deserted. Nobody answered the bell but I persisted and eventually a woman opened a small door which led into a portico where she was installing a large mosaic. This was another haven for street art, remarkable for both its size and its quality. There were studios with finished 3D pieces but little activity and no tools or works in progress. At least I had found an exhibition space and, judging from the lighting and occasional sound, people were squatting in the loft area. Artists.

The mosaic artist said that the Escocesa had housed many more studio spaces until it was bought by a bank which had evicted many of the artists and then done nothing to refurbish the space. I took a good look around and there was no sign of work that I could associate with Jimmy.

That was the end. I had now officially run out of leads.

Time to go to the beach.

I decided to walk through the neighbourhood, which turned out to be a whole lot more interesting than it first appeared. I developed an uncharacteristic boldness to peek behind roller doors and knock if I saw any signs of creativity.



Walking between the old factories towards the beach was how I came across Star, who was rattling around inside her studio. She was one of seven artists who shared the space, all graduates of a local art school.

She gave me her business card, a rubber stamp on a leaf. Star sold jewellery through shops in The Born and The Example areas, and was supported by her parents.

The work was beautiful and creative: if Aladdin really existed this would have been his cave.

Her studio mates all had jobs, to her knowledge none of them had ever held a solo show.

I asked her where I could eat and invited her to join me – but, no, she couldn't be drawn out of her studio. This artist had the bug.

Around the corner I met José who had just opened up his studio to let in the sunlight and start on his morning's work, a gentle soul who lived in a cave at the back of his workshop with Jango, his old dog.

It was getting dark when I found the Factory a few blocks away. There was a light on deep inside so I knocked on the rusty metal roller door. Someone opened and lit a cigarette in the doorway.

It was a blokey kind of space, with an annex for performances of the abject type. Genuine grunge, a whiff in the air, this was the sort of place where I expected to find him. Old fridge, a trolley and six Spanish artists who used the space to exhibit their own work twice a year – in May and September. They were polite but did not want me hanging around for long. If these guys knew Jimmy they weren't likely to give him up to an interloper on first meeting. I would have to work on them.

When all else fails, join the social set and go to the openings. At least you don't pay for the drinks. NauART, a factory converted into studios and an exhibition space, was my next engagement. The beer flowed, it was a very jolly affair and people were genuinely interested in me as a visiting artist. I may not have found Jimmy but I had found something else – the popup artist and experimental scene in Poble Nou. Barcelona has the full spectrum of visual arts, the challenge is to find it.

I had given up on Jimmy, perhaps he was working in a shoe store. Spanish boots and bags are the envy of the world.

Maybe he had gone to Paris.

I had loaded my credit card in the expectation of a big fat performance bonus and had to face the reality of my life: a dark studio with a few broken tools and a credit card debt.

Postscript

On my last full day I decided to go crazy photographing some of Barcelona's street art. It was great stuff and I wanted to pound the pavements, to smell it.

This was when I came across Stefan and Laura, spraying away in broad daylight. I had no idea that Barcelona's municipal council has a program where street artists can apply to paint up a designated wall, with some restrictions on content and decency.

Stefan reckoned he knew my guy and took my phone number, just in case. Things moved quickly, and that afternoon my phone rang. I had found Jimmy, he remembered me from the undergraduate show and wanted to meet!

After Jimmy landed in Barcelona he spent a couple of years reinventing himself as *jd* and refining his practice. He worked on the streets and sought out commissions for shopfronts and roller doors. As *jd* he spent two years in Mexico living on commissions, mostly from European or North American businesses and then returned to exhibit at the Berlin Festival. From there he was commissioned to install a mural on the building of a global IT company in Augsburg. His work has been lifted and offered for sale in international auction houses.

Jimmy was now a young man secure in his place in the world. His work is the safe, famous in-demand end of Street Art and the Sol LeWitt of graffiti; I found my guy hidden in plain sight. No way was he coming back to Australia with me; a bittersweet moment, since my \$5k bonus would not be forthcoming.

Does he still post work on the streets? Never, although sometimes he jots out instructions and leaves other artists to install them. Ever since that night at the back of the Old Bar in Lismore, he promised himself that he would never, ever get caught again.

All images in this piece are the author's.

Alison Allcock (alisonallcock@bigpond.com) has taken a broad path through life. Between 2001 and 2013 she lived and worked in Southeast Asia, the Pacific and Indigenous Australian communities offering expertise in community based tourism planning and small business development. Alison has now settled in Brunswick Heads, NSW and is developing her practice in the visual arts, especially sculpture. Her research interests focus on the social and recreational activities in contemporary Australian society. This paper is submitted as a second year independent research project towards a Bachelor of Visual Arts, Southern Cross University through the Barcelona Scholarship Program 2014.