

*“We’re all women, and we have a lot to say, not just about womanhood but about how we navigate a challenging world as women, as artists, as privileged Australians, and so on.”*

***An Interview with Chris Fontana – ShrewD Collective by Georgina Loughnan***

We respectfully acknowledge that this interview occurred on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples, who have been practicing art for over 60,000 years. Sovereignty was never ceded.

**Chris Fontana** is an artist and writer based in Bunurong, Boon Wurrung, and Wurundjeri Country. Fontana is a member of ‘ShrewD,’ an artist collective that assembles, weaves, welds, paints, sculpts, draws, and writes, maintaining their autonomous artistic styles and bringing them together to form something entirely unique. ShrewD collective exhibition ‘*Habitat*’ will be showing at Gertrude Glasshouse from 8 September - 7 October as part of the Collective Polyphony Festival.

GL: Can you explain the story behind the collective's name? How does this inform the main agenda/purpose of the collective?

CF: Ahhh, the name! Our original name was numerically inspired, but as our membership evolved into this stable, smaller and committed group, we each wanted a new name that would define us a little more aptly. Many months and text conversations later, roughly 150 or more suggestions were turned over and rejected; we landed upon “ShrewD” (Mimm’s suggestion). As the intrinsic difficulties of being an artist in a capitalist world become more apparent and the arts community gets more vocal about it as society grows more unstable generally, I think we’re all getting more openly fed up and outspoken. Happily pissed off, I would say, and ready to tell you about it. The D tells you we’re smart about it, adding a positive edge to a word used historically to demonise women and belittle their ‘passionate outbursts’. Embracing our inner (and outward) shrew is as much an aspiration as a definition. It fits.

GL: How was your collective formed, and when?

CF: Our collective formed via word of mouth in 2017, when a mutual friend wanted to bring a support group together, and one friend brought another friend along, and so on, until this tentative group of women found

themselves inside a quiet and tasteful old bar in the city, to see if we would all fit together in a professional-friendship capacity.

*Those early days were about navigating each other's expectations and deciding upon a template of mutual aims and plans for working together. The original goal was to maintain a community of art peers and to exhibit together outside of the mainstream gallery system (i.e. with some autonomy and no expense).*

We were lucky to find an opportunity early on, applying to exhibit in the basement gallery at Alliance Francais. As a litmus test, it was very positive. We went on to generate more and more dynamic events, and through that experience, we lost some members and gained some more.

*Being in a collective isn't for everyone; it requires a great deal of humility, generosity, respect and commitment, and the right ingredients for genuine friendship, something that is as beautiful as it is gradual.*

We've grown close and have become a strong peer group, enjoying each other's idiosyncrasies as friends and throwing our strengths and weaknesses into the pool in such a way that we complement each other.

GL: Themes of activism/feminism and performance often appear within the collectives' work. What parallels, if any, do you feel are between the two?

CF: Feminism and activism - what can I say? Inner shrew! We're all women, and we have a lot to say, not just about womanhood but about how we navigate a challenging world as women, as artists, as privileged Australians, and so on. I'm not sure that there's a direct relationship between this and performance - the latter is usually generated as part of a desire to extend our projects beyond our own practises, and into the community we're working with, or to gather a community around us. It's nice being able to provide a platform for other artists as a kind of satellite to our group. It enriches us and elevates an exhibition into something more immersive and surprising. Everybody goes home happy.

GL: Each ShrewD member seems to explore the collective aims through varying mediums and approaches. Have you observed any expansions in members' practices or collaborations that were unexpected?

Definitely, especially with this upcoming project, which is more interactive. We each see our [collective] projects as an opportunity to challenge ourselves whilst remaining true to our own practices. It's not necessarily unexpected, although it's sometimes surprising. Somebody quietly invites some poets to do a reading in the gallery, one of the poets brings a musician, and suddenly, the event expands. This affects how we plan future events; a world having opened up to us with varied possibilities. These things wouldn't have become part of our vision for ourselves had we operated alone.

*That's a highlight of being in a collective; your world becomes bigger, fuller, and less predictable. And a lot more fun.*

GL: What is the creative process of the collective?

CF: A shared project usually evolves spontaneously; we let ourselves respond to each other's enthusiasm and see where it takes us. Not all suggestions are embraced, but when an idea appeals to all of us, we brainstorm until it develops into something that is often quite different from the original idea. Everybody's input carries equal weight, and we test the balance between what we *want* to contribute and what we *can realistically* contribute or achieve. Once we have a goal, we each take on organisational roles, bringing it all together to make something happen. Logistics aside, we each decide upon how our practice will be applied to the project, and off we go. There's a lot of discussion and feedback, but also respectful distance as we work independently on our own contributions—*that fine balance between the individual and the collective idea.*

As we progress, things change. Everything is always harder than we expect it to be, but we get there in the end. It's a valuable experience, with a lot of give and take a lot of compromise, and it's immensely rewarding, often exceeding our expectations. And, of course, all of the above takes place with good food.

GL: How do you support each other within the collective?

CF: Very naturally; we're a nurturing bunch, really. Knowing the ins and outs of each other's lives, support becomes instinctive. If necessary, we adapt project directions to accommodate things that are happening for

anybody on a personal level. Mostly, it's just a genuinely supportive environment; if someone has to drop the ball, another is always there to pick it up. There's a lot of trust and positive attitude.

GL: How does an exchange of knowledge underpin your collective?

*CF: The exchange of knowledge is central to how we operate together. All vocal about our worldly concerns, a rewarding aspect of working together is how much we learn from each other's research, interests and political obsessions.*

We have an ongoing conversation going through message threads, and so are exposed to each other's thought processes (and opinions). Sharing interesting articles, podcasts, and so on. We've created a personalised group milieu.

GL: What other collectives, artists and curators do you look to in formulating your own collective position?

CF: We originally admired a couple of collectives from afar but knew they didn't necessarily provide the model we would work towards. One was Forensic Architecture - admirably proactive as activists but with more professionally tailored skills than we have within our own group. Really, we formed organically, feeling our way forward. It's an ongoing process. It's only now, through the Collective Polyphony Festival, that we've been exposed to the inner workings of other collectives. It'll be interesting to hear their stories. Artists and curators make up our greater community and so will be influential as a matter of course. As a collective, so far, I can't isolate any particular influence, but that will change as we interact more with other groups.

GL: The collective's artworks occupy space inside the gallery and within the public sphere. How do you feel each context informs the production and interpretation of the work?

CF: Once we have a space in mind, it inevitably informs how we organise our ideas and move forward. For example, for our Toora project, our goal was to reactivate the unused shopfronts of a small town in South Gippsland. Our respective individual roles were to establish an art installation in our designated windows. This formed the 'interior' element of that event, but the context was central to our overall project development. Why were those shop fronts empty? What was the town like before? We had to consider the nature of small

towns generally and how they change once larger towns with shopping centre complexes affect their business capacity. How does that town's identity change? What happens to the community? Does the community rely upon 'commerce to survive? Could art be used to make a difference, filling the spaces that commerce leaves empty? As we developed the project by reaching out to town residents, it grew into a one-day festival that involved the cooperation of a local progress group. Our exhibition 'opening' went off with a bang, and the progress group planned an annual festival. Customising an exhibition event to the character of a particular space creates an opportunity for resonance and social impact.

GL: What do you think about being part of the Collective Polyphony Festival along with many other collectives?

CF: When we began planning *Habitat*, it was just us - the festival grew from that seed as Nina's [Sanadze] social practice evolved. So we each had some input as it was developing, but mostly, we watched on with awe as Nina stirred up all of this amazing shared creative energy. Nina is the mad scientist who's been doing all of the event curating; she has inexhaustible energy. It's an absolute honor to know her and to have watched it unfold - I love how it's grown, and I am so happy to be a part of something so positive. We're all looking forward to meeting the other collectives and seeing their work.

GL: What do you feel is one of the most rewarding things about being a part of a collective?

CF: *That one's easy - the friendship. It can be that simple. Art is a lonely business, but it offers opportunities for intense connection. With our ongoing conversations, there's a great sense of belonging.*

GL: How do you see the future of your collective?

CF: We'll no doubt continue to work together. Somebody will have an idea; an opportunity will present itself. We don't force it; just wait for that organic moment to happen, a genesis, and from there, we'll move forward. For now, the upcoming event has all of our focus, and we'll be immersed in the moment all the way through.