

Squishface Studio: A Physical Hub for Comics in Melbourne

by David Blumenstein and Squishface Studio

What Is A Squishface, In Brief

Squishface Studio is an open comics studio located in Brunswick, Australia. It is a single room shop-front on Victoria St, just off one of Brunswick's main shopping areas, Sydney Rd.

"Open" means that we are open to the public six days a week (11am-6pm, Tuesday-Sunday), and that we invite them into the studio to look at what we're doing, talk to us, draw with us, buy our artwork and comics and commission us for jobs.

"Comics" means we prefer that our residents make some form of sequential art. Five of the six founding members can be described as cartoonists or comic artists, and our tastes encompass anything from mainstream superhero books to *MAD*-type satire to artcomics and graphic novels.

We hold regular events at the studio, which include a monthly drawing night, a Ladies' Drawing Auxiliary and kids classes during the school term and holidays. We also stage exhibitions, parties, launches and other events at Squishface or at co-operating external venues.

At time of writing, there are eight artists resident at Squishface. Sarah Howell, Ben Hutchings, Ive Sorocuk and myself are full-time residents. Scott Reid, Jess Parker, Teagan Boscia and Alexander Trevisan are part-time residents.i

When it opened in December 2011, Squishface was the only venue of its kind in Melbourne. Its unique factors are its focus on comics and small press, its physical permanence, its openness to the public and its balance of artists' workspace, retail and classroom.

These factors aren't easy to balance, or to maintain, so it remains to be seen how long Squishface will exist (and in what form) and whether others will create similar spaces elsewhere in Australia. We hope so!

A Comics Hub In Melbourne

More scholarly and informative works will have been written about the "Melbourne comics scene", and I suggest you go find them if you want real background on Melbourne as a hive of comics activity.ii

I became involved in Melbourne's comics scene in 2000. At that time, few comics retailers would stock your books, and those that agreed would not support them with visibility

or promotion, and would generally act put out by your existence.

The main place I found local comics was at PolyEster Books (which also stocked my first attempts)ⁱⁱⁱ. An event called the Make It Up Zine Fair^{iv} was where I first encountered local cartoonists. Later I became friendly with some of the people associated with the loose comics collective called Silent Army, including Tim Danko, Jo Waite and Nicola Hardy.

I befriended comics people from interstate through regular attendance of the National Young Writers Festival in Newcastle through most of the 2000s. Among those were Ben Hutchings (then a Canberran) and Sarah Howell (then a Hobartian). Sarah moved to Melbourne in 2007; Ben in 2010.

The cartoonists I stayed closest to were the ones who did “funny comics” like mine, or who were involved in animation as well (they also tended to be the ones accepting of the term “cartoonists”, and were, therefore, not wankers).

In the latter 2000s, informal talk arose about the possibility of a permanent hub (or even peak body) for comic artists/writers in Melbourne. Bernard Caleo had ideas about creating an office for such an organisation in the (then-new) Wheeler Centre.

Another discussion I attended considered the possibility of a large shared comics studio space populated with working cartoonists. Spaces of this kind have existed and been successful in, for e.g., Europe and America.^v

Once it became clear what such a space would cost each member in rent, an alternative suggestion was put, that being to break into a disused milk bar and make comics on the floor by torchlight. The discussion (which took place on a Saturday afternoon at the Standard Hotel in Fitzroy) then degenerated somewhat, though pleasantly so.

By 2011, several graphic novels by Melbourne artists^{vi} had been, or were about to be, released nationally and internationally. The regular Melbourne meetup^{vii}, an institution since the 1990s, had experienced somewhat of a generational turnover which would shortly revitalise it. A new comics store called All Star Comics had opened in Melbourne's CBD, owned by two ex-comic shop employees^{viii} with more interest in the local comics community than most.

In July/August of 2011, eight Melbourne comic artists^{ix} took up residence in the NGV Studio, a gallery in Federation Square run by the National Gallery of Victoria. They spent a month working at their own desks in the space, which was open to the public during extended business hours and on the weekend. The project was called *Inherent Vice*.

Sarah and Ben enjoyed their time in the space so much that, after the month was over, they conceived a plan to continue working in a similar space where they could interact with the public. Ben was particularly keen to return to a communal comics environment, *Inherent Vice* having been his only extended experience of this.

I don't think it's an accident that Sarah and Ben both come from “regional” backgrounds – they moved to Melbourne partly for its vibrant comics scene, and were perhaps more interested than even the locals in meeting new people and being part of local comics activity.

Starting Squishface

The groundwork was done by Ben. He and I looked around for an appropriate space, and he found it at 309 Victoria St.x He expressed extreme enthusiasm for the location even when he thought it lacked a toilet.xi We asked him to please check whether it had one before signing anything.

Ben initially had trouble finding enough residents to make the studio work financially. His dream was a studio filled with the funny-comics-making non-wanker cartoonists we love best.

Having put out a call for residents, he managed only to find myself and Sarah. We were eventually joined by friends Marta Tesoro and Arran McKenna, and, finally, illustrator/concept artist Sacha Bryning. Ben was only able to get us on board by agreeing to take on half of the monthly rent himself. The rest of us split the other half.xii

Our goals at the outset were fairly modest:

- To replicate some of the feel of *Inherent Vice*
- To be fun
- To last a year

Nice Experiences

The studio has now been in operation for a little over two years, and we're currently leasing for a third.

These are some of the results:

- Opening day was January 26, 2012. We had food, drinks and chat. Sarah estimates attendance in the region of 200-300 for the day. We chuck a similar celebration every Jan 26 (though now with BBQ).
- We've had significant national media attention, including television and print.
- Our regular drawing night takes place on the last Wednesday of each month and attracts anywhere up to fifteen or so people (any more would be hard to seat). Occasionally only

one person shows. We have a good time anyway. We've also been a host venue for the Comikaze 24 Hour Comic Challenge in 2012 and 2013.

- Ladies Drawing Auxiliary is a monthly night devoted to the work of women who draw. Guest speakers screen examples and discuss their process and history for a mixed audience.
- Several exhibitions, including *Exhibitchin'!* (2012), Bernard Caleo and Jo Waite's *The Haunted Spaceship* (2012) and the 2012/2013 editions of *The Squishface Coaster Show* (for which we host a public day of drawing on cardboard beer mats). We will probably continue to run *Coaster Shows* at Squishface, but we think other future exhibitions may be best served by taking place in an actual gallery space, as *Exhib2tchin'!* (2013) was.
- We exhibited as a group at the Cowwarr Art Space in Cowwarr, Vic, and were resident artists there for a pleasant few days.
- We've taken part in local Brunswick events, such as the Sydney Rd Street Party, and exhibited at events including Supanova Pop Culture Expo, Entertainment Biz Expo, Sticky Institute's *Festival of the Photocopier* Zine Fair and Comics Gong in Wollongong, NSW.
- Sarah started out teaching kids' comics classes on school holidays. Now Sarah and Ben run school term classes as well. We have also traveled to regional Victoria and NSW to teach/run workshops.
- We've been visited by a number of international guests. Agathe de Gennes, of France, was our first official international resident, spending several weeks working on Australian-influenced picture book art. We also welcomed Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly at an informal reception in late 2013.
- We've had 21 residents (part- or full-time or who stayed for short periods, usually to work on a specific project), and five work experience students. Of the six original residents, myself, Sarah and Ben remain (though we hope Marta will return late in 2014).

What Will Kill Squishface?

There are several main challenges to keeping a venture like Squishface going, but mostly they boil down to money and enthusiasm. Without enough of either, we will fall over.

It's difficult attracting and keeping the kind of people we prefer (intelligent artists with a good sense of fun) because the cost can be prohibitive (for artists, *any* cost can be prohibitive). On the other hand, prospective residents who can spare the cost of rent generally are too busy to take full advantage of the studio (unless they live nearby, as Ben and Ive do).

The studio needs to remain interesting and useful for us and our residents. Taking part in events, and organising our own, helps with that but too much of it can take time away from our own work and make the studio more of a burden. 2013 was a very busy year. We resolved to make 2014 less so, and to make events we run more financially viable.xiii

Upkeep is necessary – this includes at the physical studio and in our online marketing – and is time-consuming. We have no work rosters and these tasks fall to whoever picks up on them; otherwise, they are sometimes missed (for e.g.: forgetting to invite people to events, buying dunny roll).

The studio is not only a hub for work but also for fun – our social lives also revolve, to a large degree, around Squishface. It could become problematic to morale if it starts to feel like the place is taking over our lives.

Numerous elements came together to bring Squishface into being, but the most important one was and continues to be Ben Hutchings' willingness to devote his time and money to it. If he wanted to quit tomorrow, it would probably be over.

Ways Squishface Could Pay For Itself

- Teach classes. Late in 2013 we lost several residents around the same time, which made things extra difficult financially. This was when Sarah and Ben began teaching classes during the school term. Holiday classes had been a pay-when-you-arrive sort of thing, whereas the holiday classes require booking/payment in advance, which gets income in sooner and ensures the class will go ahead. Sarah and Ben really enjoy the classes, and will continue doing as much of them as they can fit in.
- Attract jobs for residents. Our physical presence has led to jobs for us that might not have happened otherwise. People have wandered in looking to commission cartoons/illustrations (for a gift, for a book, for film). Some of these have been particularly rewarding (enjoyable, if not remunerative). We would like to make this happen more, and I expect any promotional exercises we have time for in the future would be to serve this goal.
- Sell things. Our residents make comic books, prints, T-shirts and original art. We have a retail space at the front of the studio but it is usually an afterthought and often is difficult to tell apart from the rest of the place. As a result we do not sell as much merchandise as we could. We do not have major plans to change this, though Ben has shown interest in adding work from artists outside the studio.
- Applying for grants. Sarah has a background in grant writing and arts administration, and decided against trying to get government funding for the space early on, preferring to

get established under our own steam and then, later, consider applying to have specific Squishface projects funded. This is something we haven't had time to seriously look into yet.

- Fundraising/crowdfunding. We intended to fundraise to help pay rent early on, but the organising never quite happened. Having found the co-sharing model works for us (as long as we can keep the studio full) we seem to have discarded the idea. I imagine we would consider it again if things became dire.
- Become a publisher. We've tossed around the idea of publishing work by our residents (in the form of a Squishface anthology, for instance), but it hasn't been a priority. And publishing is no way to make money.

What We Like About It The Way It Is

Our studio has become a hub for the comics community in Melbourne.^{xiv} We didn't necessarily expect that this would happen, but we hoped it might. Clearly we enjoy having friendly cartoonists in, whether they are known to us or are strangers.

We are visited often by people we don't know. Some are locals who happen across us, some are people who have heard about us and come by for a look, some are interstaters or internationals who have done research in advance and take the time to track the place down.

Many are cartoonists or illustrators themselves, but some are simply art-lovers interested in the space. We particularly like meeting artists who have been functioning outside of our own circles.^{xv}

Having become a recognisable entity in the Melbourne art scene, we are also approached by cultural institutions (e.g. city councils, Melbourne Writers Festival, National Gallery of Victoria) to take part in their events and festivals.

Having different kinds of artists working together in a small space has led to some cross-pollination in art styles, knowledge sharing (especially about techniques and materials) and a bit of collaboration.

The studio does not have much of *Inherent Vice's* feel, due to the different situation, locale and personnel. It does have its own enjoyable vibe, though.

Could Squishface Happen Elsewhere In Australia?

The only similar Australian space we are aware of is SPLAToons Cartoon Shop and Gallery in Beechworth, Vic. SPLAToons opened in late 2010, and is Adrian "Oz" Osborne's working

cartooning/caricature studio. People can walk in and commission one-off drawings or order merchandise with custom illustrations. “Oz” also runs cartoon workshops for kids.

The Silent Army collective, having been relatively quiet during the later 2000s, revamped their online presence and, late in 2012, opened a shop/event space called the Silent Army Storeroom inside Michael Fikaris' space at Blender Studios in Melbourne's CBD. The Storeroom is open Fridays from 12pm-8pm and often holds book launches Friday evenings.

I would think a Squishface-type venue could grow in a regional space. Rent would be lower and there might be more space available for larger events than ours. I suspect if this happened it'd be in an arty “satellite city” such as Castlemaine in Victoria.

Anyone interested in starting something like Squishface elsewhere could probably do better than we are financially, if they either:

- paid greater attention to retailing (potentially more income), or
- were closed to the public (potentially lower rent).

We think Squishface would be a lesser thing if it went either of these ways, but it's early days and there's certainly more than one way of doing this stuff.^{xvi}

A Squishy Future

We've considered becoming an incorporated association or some other formalised entity, if only to be able to register a Squishface bank account. We're looking at the best way to do this.

We also hope one day to be better “at money” and “at planning” generally. Those things get in the way of making art too much for us to want to look at them seriously. We have no “five year plan”.

Larger, external events are something we have wanted to try staging, and Sarah is getting the chance to do this as the director of the 2014 Home Cooked Comics Festival, co-presented by Darebin City Council and Squishface. This will take place in late April.

Sarah has recently hired on two unpaid volunteers to help with community outreach and organisation and promotion of Squishface events (and the Home Cooked festival particularly).

We expect our membership will continue to change as residents change jobs and priorities and, in some cases, move cities.^{xvii} The goal will be to keep the space as full as possible and keep the rent fully paid.^{xviii}

We are running more kids' classes than ever – eight per school term and one per each

school holiday break. We would find it difficult to run any more without seriously impinging on Ben and Sarah's other jobs.

Come end of 2014 we will need to reassess the studio's situation. At the moment things are tight but we feel we can make it to our third birthday!

“Cool books, good art, inspiring kids”

– what Ben Hutchings said when I asked him what he wants Squishface to be about now.

Appendix: All past and present Squishface residents

Ben Hutchings

Sarah Howell

David Blumenstein

Marta Tesoro

Arran McKenna

Sacha Bryning

Jo Waite

Scarlette Baccini

Patrick Alexander

Lily Mae Martin

Laura Renfrew

Scott Reid

Jess Parker

Teagan Boscia

Alexander Trevisan

Agathe de Gennes

Jase Harper

Lucy Fekete

Haydn Kwan

Natalie Britten

Samantha Ee

Endnotes

- i Residents currently get unlimited access to the space, use of a desk, wall and window space for exhibiting, can sell stock in our retail space and use the Riso printer. Other facilities include wi-fi, sink, bar fridge and dunny.
- ii Maybe ask Bernard Caleo about this. Or try Bruce Mutard. Or, if you want to go way back, read Phil Bentley's *A Life In Comics: a personal history of comics in Australia 1960-1990*.
- iii Paul Elliott, who owned PolyEster Books at the time, was happy to stock small press of all kinds and was an exception to the earlier assertion.
- iv Make It Up grew into what is currently Melbourne's Emerging Writers Festival.
- v Examples include Sequential Art Workshop (Florida, USA), Studio Gimle (Copenhagen), The Fleece Station (Deptford, UK) and the now-defunct Pizza Island (NYC, USA).
- vi Notably: Nicki Greenberg's *The Great Gatsby*, Mandy Ord's *Rooftops*, Pat Grant's *Blue*, Bruce Mutard's *The Sacrifice*.
- vii Meets last Saturday of the month, 2pm, Prince Alfred Hotel, Carlton
- viii Mitchell Davies and Troy Varker.
- ix Rebecca Clements, Michael Fikaris, Simon Hanselmann, Michael Hawkins, Sarah Howell, Ben Hutchings, Mandy Ord.
- x Not coincidentally, it was not far from where he lived at the time. He had been checking out properties for rent in the vicinity of Sydney Rd for some time.
- xi It has a toilet.
- xii Over time the financial load was taken off Ben. By the end of our first year all residents paid an equal share of the rent. At time of writing the monthly rent for a full time resident is \$200/pp.
- xiii I realised while writing this that I'm making it sound like we have real "planning meetings". We really don't.
- xiv Not "the" hub. "A" hub.
- xv We're finding they're outside our circles usually because they are from regional or outer-suburban areas and don't make it into the city much.
- xvi I just came across Carmine Street Comics in New York, which is apparently a more retail-focused version of the open studio idea, with regular artists making work and taking commissions for a day or so a week.
- xvii Arran McKenna has moved back to Canberra, and Patrick Alexander to Japan.
- xviii At the current monthly rate, we need seven full time residents (or the equivalent) to fully cover rent. Right now, with four full-time and four part-time residents, we are running at a loss of about \$100/month.