



Though she is technically an Australian, Lea Rekow, 38 has been abroad so long that she considers herself a citizen of the world. Rekow is the founding director of Gigantic ArtSpace (GAS), a multimedia art gallery on Franklin Street in downtown Manhattan.

Gas opened at the end of 2003 and, under Rekow's direction, it has shown the work of musicians David Byrne and Steve Reich, Lee Ranaldo from Sonic Youth and the music group Negativland, among other high-profile exhibitors. This is no small accomplishment considering the survival rate within New York's gallery circuit, and the fact that Franklin Street, in the south of Manhattan, is a world away from the Chelsea gallery district.

A multimedia artist and documentary-maker, Rekow records the stories of people all over the world, mostly in post-war zones. In pursuing her subjects, she has adopted a peripatetic existence that has involved stints in nearly every major city in the world.

This lifestyle has meant she hasn't settled back in Australia for more than a few months at a time during the past 13 years. "After all this time here I feel like a New Yorker to a certain extent, but overall I don't really feel connected to any one place," she says. "I feel like a foreigner no matter where I am, but I sit within that pretty comfortably for the most part." While home has ranged from the African bush to the city, these days it is a cosy one-bedroom apartment on Myrtle Avenue, Brooklyn. For the time being, at least.

Rekow's entrée to New York arrived in the form of an invitation to establish an exchange programme between her old university, Southern Cross, and Pratt Institute in Manhattan. She was offered the job in 1995 after dropping by to visit the university. After establishing an exchange programme and studying at Pratt, she was offered a teaching position in video production. During this time, she volunteered at the Centre for Peace and Human Security, which took her to Burma to film a rebel army in the jungle. She is still editing the footage for a documentary.

Just before leaving for Burma, she was asked to be the director of GAS, this time after a chance meeting on the street with its financial backer. In fact, most of Rekow's opportunities have come through chance meetings. Each time she has needed something, New York, it seems, comes through for her.

"The whole move to New York and everything after that was pretty random," she says with a shrug. "It was always about just running into someone who asked me if I wanted the opportunity to do something that really interested me."

Even the struggle for accommodation was solved for her, when a woman walked into a bar where she was sitting and announced she was vacating her apartment. Rekow maintains she wouldn't have it any other way; New York's brand of chaos is one of the main reasons the city suits her. "I love that it's all nuts here," she says. "I can't stand the rats and the garbage and I hate the way you have to fight your way through the traffic, the heat, the noise and the abuse. But it's not all neat and ordered and I find that really attractive. My ideal form of government is responsible anarchy and, while that's far from existing in the United States, I think New York has a little bit of it."

Despite the city's seemingly endless stream of opportunity and stimuli, since September 11 and the re-election of George Bush, Rekow feels that even in a city as left wing as New York, some of the conservative, religious roots of American culture have become more apparent, something she finds frightening. After the terrorist attacks, most of her Australian friends deserted the city.

"When September 11 happened I wasn't scared because I've lived in so many war zones. I swore I would never live in Australia under Howard, but then, here I am living in New York under George Bush. I'm not grooving on the politics right now."

After 13 years of living in some of the most remote places around the world, the question remains, would she ever stop traveling, leave New York and return to Australia permanently?

"Ultimately, I don't want to grow old in New York," she says. "I think it's a great place to be when you're young but I don't want to be 65 and living here. It makes sense to go back to Australia but I can't actually make that decision just yet. I'm not ready, but I want to be."

-- by Matthew Phillip