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TRANSITION: BRG TO CCAS

In July 1987, Bitumen River Gallery (BRG) was amalgamated with the Arts Council Gallery (ACG) to create Canberra Contemporary Art Space (CCAS). Anne Virgo played a seminal role in the amalgamation; she began as BRG's second coordinator during 1984/85, became ACG director in 1986, and was appointed as inaugural director of CCAS in 1987. Her 10 years in Canberra coincided with the transformation of local contemporary art practice from a youthful collective operating at the margins – as reflected at BRG – into an expression of contemporary art operating in a national mainstream context – as demonstrated through CCAS.

The notion and reality of collective practice at BRG, and the consequences of the loss of the collective model speaks to the important philosophical schism that characterised the wider national development of contemporary art: whether arts practitioners were better served by spaces run by artists, for artists; or whether contemporary art should take its place within the network of funded art galleries and museums.

Anne Virgo

Virgo arrived in Canberra at the beginning of 1984 as one of two part-time coordinators at BRG. After her appointment as inaugural director of CCAS in 1987, she remained in that position until 1993 when she left for Melbourne to become director of the Australian Print Workshop (APW).

Virgo completed a fine arts degree at the South Australian School of Art (SA SOA), majoring in printmaking and photography. For a year or so after graduation, she shared studio space in Adelaide, making prints and photographs and working part-time to pay the rent. Along with many of her early 1980s cohort from the SA SOA – and like Mandy Martin in the decade before her – she left art school with an expanded social and political consciousness:

I had focused specifically on what, at that time, was called community arts practice. When I went through art school and did a fine art degree my mentors at the time were very much the socialist drivers, part of the socialist party agitators in Adelaide, and so I grew up in a very political environment.¹

Passing through Canberra in December 1983 and knowing only one person in the city, the 22-year-old Virgo read the *Canberra Times* advertisement for a shared coordinator's position at BRG. She submitted an application and returned to Adelaide. Within weeks she was back in Canberra for an interview in the gallery, with a panel comprising Sasha Grishin and artists Kay Ransome, Tony Ayres and Stephanie Radok. 'We were sitting around on chairs, someone was sitting on a metal garbage tin – it was pretty rudimentary.'² Virgo was offered the job and started at the beginning of 1984 in a job-share position with BRG stalwart Mark Denton:

Mark was a local Canberra person and I was the person completely left of centre because I'd come from outside of Canberra. I hadn't made a conscious decision to move to Canberra – it was just one of those things that happened. I didn't know anyone in the art world [in Canberra]. [I was] totally disconnected.³

Despite this self-identified outsider status, Virgo was well-suited for the shared coordinator's position in the young collective. At SA SOA, she had had it 'drummed into [her] psyche' that 'to be an individual artist was almost self-indulgent, that it wasn't about the individual it was about working collectively, working in a different way'.⁴ Arriving in Canberra, she moved into a share house in Yarralumla. The salary for the two-and-a-half-day a week position was \$7,500, at that time 'not much more' than the dole:

1 Anne Virgo, interview with the author, 17 September 2013.

2 Virgo, 2013.

3 Virgo, 2013.

4 Virgo, 2013.

[T]o supplement our income from the Gallery we both took on other jobs; Mark worked on the merry-go-round in Civic and I cleaned the offices of an architect. Both Mark and I intended to continue with our practice as the role of coordinator was a shared position, but it wasn't long before we realised that this was almost impossible. It seemed that we were both working full-time on a part-time wage – not unusual for an arts-related job.⁵

When Denton left BRG to work with Julia Church and Kath Walters at their Redletter imprint in Melbourne in the middle of 1984, Virgo took on the coordinator's role full-time. She was drawn to arts administration and, with Denton's departure, decided to pack away her 'paints and palettes' and pursue a career supporting artists.⁶ 'I realised,' she wrote in 1986, 'that arts administration was my first love and that my practice was secondary. For the next year and a half Bitumen River was my life.'⁷ Virgo's introduction to the 1984 BRG scrapbook serves to underline the fledgling collective's ability to survive, despite tenuous circumstances, to the point where it could attract the beginnings of a useful funding base. Its survival to that point is testament to the continuing support of the local community. She named the year as 'a "turning point"' for the gallery:

After two years [and ten months] of surviving on volunteer labour, on an inadequate budget, often witnessing 'burn-out' by key members due to the enormous task of running an organisation with no or very little financial reward for their work, BRG was able to employ a full-time co-ordinator. This position enabled such basic administrative functions as a book-keeping system, a filing system and a more efficient program of activities to operate.⁸

Importantly, it also allowed the new coordinator to travel. It is clear that, from her arrival, Virgo was interested in the wider arts community, both in Canberra and nationally. Throughout Australia, collectives and artist-run spaces that were opened and staffed by young artists, as well as funded contemporary art spaces, were proliferating. By 1984, only the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) were without a federally funded contemporary art space. The contemporary arts sector was on the cusp of enormous change and Virgo, who proved to be both ambitious and strategic, arrived in Canberra at a pivotal moment in the development of contemporary art in the city.

5 BRG, '5th birthday show', CCAS archives.

6 Virgo, 2013.

7 Virgo, 2013.

8 Anne Virgo, 'Introduction', BRG scrapbook, 1984, CCAS archives.

Virgo's two years with BRG were characterised by tremendous energy and curiosity. She travelled widely and frequently with the aim of progressing national relationships and building the Territory's capacity in contemporary arts practice. In 1984, she attended four state conferences: 'Artists' week' at the *Adelaide festival of the arts* from 9–19 March; the *Regional development and touring exhibition* conference in Melbourne on 27 April; the *Art of survival* conference in Melbourne on 29 April; and, on 2 June, the Contemporary Art Spaces Association conference in Sydney.⁹ There she met with 'representatives from each state to discuss common issues and develop a stronger network'.¹⁰ Continuing the gallery's relationship with Canberra School of Art (CSA), Virgo gave a lecture there midway through 1984 as part of the *Art forum* public lectures program.¹¹

Virgo's first working contact with the ACG at Gorman House, then directed by Ben Grady, also occurred in 1984 when a year of planning resulted in the BRG collective coordinating, with ACG, the local tour of the travelling political poster exhibition *Truth rules OK?* This exhibition, arising at the Experimental Art Foundation (EAF) in Adelaide, toured to the Woden and Belconnen shopping centres.¹² At BRG, an arts fashion parade heralded the exhibition *This year's model*, a china-painting workshop presaged *A new spirit in china painting*, and women's films were shown at the opening of the *Women's archives exhibition*. In addition, BRG hosted lectures by Terry Smith (on Frida Kahlo), Gary Sangster from Sydney's Artspace, Robert McDonald and Juilee Pryor from Sydney's Art Unit, and Juan Davila (whom Ayres had met and invited to Canberra).

Modelling a collective ethos, Virgo, Ayres, Denton and BRG member Robert Saxton all engaged in correspondence on behalf of the gallery through the first half of 1984. By March, approximately 100 people and organisations were on BRG's mailing list.¹³ Potential exhibitors were given the aims and objectives of BRG, the current gallery roster, a membership form and an exhibition agreement. In an ad hoc manner, CSA often

9 The Contemporary Art Spaces Association was the first iteration of the peak organisation Contemporary Art Organisations Australia (CAOA).

10 BRG scrapbook, 1984.

11 This initial contact progressed to a four-year teaching stint in professional practice at CSA from 1988 to 1991. CSA amalgamated with the Canberra School of Music to form the Canberra Institute of the Arts in 1988. *Art forum* was initiated by Sellbach in 1983 as the *Living arts program*.

12 *Truth rules OK?* was co-curated by Ken Bolton and Christine Goodwin and opened at the EAF in Adelaide in September 1983.

13 Anne Virgo, letter to Marcus [unattributed, but most likely Marcus Breen], 7 March 1984, 'Correspondence', 1984/2, CCAS archives.

loaned frames for works in exhibitions, and members of the collective were prepared to frame and hang works for visiting artists, to sit the gallery for a shows' duration and to provide a bed for visiting artists. Artists were asked to print invitations and posters if possible, and posters continued to be sold from the BRG poster racks during and after exhibition. Members collectively mailed exhibition invitations out and postered details of up-coming events widely around the city.

By mid-1984, a core group of those BRG members who guided the gallery through its considerable early difficulties had left Canberra for capitals interstate. Denton was in Melbourne, as was Ayres who enrolled to study film at Swinburne and was writing for *Art Network*; Karilyn Brown, stepping in as BRG coordinator for three months after Alison Alder's departure for Melbourne in early 1983, was working with the Visual Arts Board (VAB) of the Australia Council in Sydney. After a year in Melbourne, Alder was on the move to Redback Graphix, which was founded by Michael Callaghan and Gregor Cullen in Brisbane in 1979 (one year before Megalo), before moving to Wollongong in 1980 and then to Sydney in 1985. Collective members were buoyed by the backing of their peers who had left Canberra for positions interstate and who continued to support the gallery in various ways, including being present at openings. These former colleagues continued their support through the next few years, visiting when in town, exchanging contacts, showing in exhibitions at BRG and, importantly, facilitating national touring shows between artist-run spaces.

Reflecting the growing profile of contemporary art in Canberra and the increased national visibility of BRG and its activities, the gallery's 1985 Community Development Fund (CDF) grant, which was announced in November 1984, was increased to \$27,000 and BRG also received \$8,750, its first grant, from the VAB of the Australia Council.

The ongoing difficulties of operating effectively in a collective environment were reflected at the end of Virgo's first year. The November BRG meeting unanimously agreed that Virgo should continue in the coordinator's position if she wished to. Virgo *was* willing to continue if members made themselves more available for consultation and support.¹⁴

14 BRG, minutes from meeting, 13 November 1984, 'Meeting minutes, 1984', CCAS archives.

One of the defining characteristics of the BRG journey during the period from 1981 to 1985 was the number of reactive meetings called. This was a result of the gallery's ad hoc genesis and the ongoing problems caused by inadequate funding and staffing, pitted against the strong desire for the gallery to succeed.

Having run BRG almost singlehandedly through to the beginning of 1983, Alder's 'burnout' precipitated an emergency meeting of members in late 1982 to assess future directions.¹⁵ On that occasion a decision was taken to institute a formal collective membership base in an effort to streamline procedures and to spread the administrative load across members. In August 1983, BRG's *Future directions forum*, which included Grishin among its attendees, determined that the collective should commence proceedings to become either an incorporated association or a registered business, and on 6 September 1984 – in an act that conferred a public legitimacy on the collective – BRG was incorporated as an association in the ACT.¹⁶ This was a fundamentally important step that, in its formality, signalled maturity and a desire among members to secure the collective's future.

The 1983 conference elicited a letter from artist, teacher and BRG member Neil Roberts (1954–2002) who, unable to attend, wrote that 'the survival of the gallery or something similar' was 'vital' to the development of the visual arts in Canberra.¹⁷ Roberts accepted that 'a collective-run gallery is a desirable ideal' but believed that innovations such as 'performances, installations and various one night wonders ... could be more difficult to undertake given the trials and tribulations of a truly collective model'. Roberts was an active collective member from 1982 with strong ties to CSA, particularly the Glass Workshop that, with Klaus Moje, he was instrumental in setting up in 1983. He was acutely aware of the inherent difficulties in maintaining a long-term collective consensus, given the members' relative youth, poverty and lack of experience. He personally believed that in the interests of:

15 Alison Alder, letter to Geoff Shera, Brisbane, undated, 'Correspondence, 1984', CCAS archives.

16 Another compelling reason for this decision was so that the telephone number could be listed as 'Bitumen River Gallery', rather than 'A Alder'.

17 Roberts was also instrumental in developing the Ingo Kleinart-led *ACT 1* (1978), *ACT 2* (1980), and *ACT 3* (1982).

maximising ... influence both here and interstate ... especially at this point of time in Canberra, the appointment of a decisive and forward-looking director with the power to respond quickly to opportunity and change would be an exciting step in the right direction.¹⁸

A series of forums and meetings held from 1981 to the end of 1983 resulted in actions that enabled the gallery to stay open in the lead-up to Virgo's appointment. Virgo recalled that during her two-year period from the beginning of 1984 to early 1986:

there were many times along the way – 'crisis meetings' they were called – where you'd pull the group together and 'There's no energy, what are we doing, who's involved, who's doing this, what's going to happen' – so many moments where it just could have fallen over.¹⁹

On 2 May 1984, during Virgo's first year at BRG, around 30 people attended the gallery to reflect on the present and discuss future directions. A year later, in the wake of the 1985 Pascoe Report,²⁰ 17 members attended a BRG 'search conference', again titled 'Future directions', at the premises of the community theatre company Through Art Unity (TAU).²¹ That only half the number of members who attended the previous year's forum were present in 1985 indicates that the collective membership continued to be unstable, a consequence of the still peripatetic nature of the lives of the city's visual artists.

There were limited opportunities for visual artists to progress their career while remaining in Canberra. In response to a question posed about changes in Canberra and what opportunities and constraints such changes might represent for BRG, members' responses included that, while acknowledging 'an increased interest in galleries and art in general', Canberra:

Offer[ed] limited opportunities as a place for artists to live and work, especially after the publication of the Pascoe Report; rather Canberra was perceived as a stepping-stone en route to Sydney or Melbourne.²²

18 Neil Roberts, letter to Alison Alder, 3 August 1983. CCAS archives.

19 Virgo, 2013.

20 See Chapter 2, 'The Pascoe Report', for an examination of the report's wider effects on the ACT arts community.

21 Geoffrey Milne named TAU as the 'only orthodox community theatre company in Canberra' (*Theatre Australia (un)limited: Australian theatre since the 1950s*, Australian Playwrights, no 10, Rodopi, Amsterdam, New York, 2004, p 45).

22 'Future directions', a report of the search conference, compiled by Greg Sugden, TAU, 9 June 1985, 'Future directions', envelope, CCAS archives.

The Pascoe Report cast a long shadow on BRG members. Emerging into a more receptive milieu, Pascoe's recommendations gave little hope of future federal government-assisted growth. With the beginnings of the handover to self-government only four years away, concern was also voiced about self-government's economic effects on the local visual arts sector and the proposed concomitant federal government cutbacks to the Community Employment Programs (CEPs), which continued to provide start-up funds for community cultural projects.

Possible futures that privileged growth in both space and programming were envisioned when members were asked to consider what BRG would 'ideally' look like in five years. A key concern was to seek out a larger space, 'more space and more staff', based in the old GPO or in a 'large warehouse or building that the collective had "seized"'.²³ This larger space would allow the 'staging [of] dual shows (thematic and experimental) at the same time' with performance art, sculpture, large installations and 'risky and innovative' art.²⁴ A focus on artists and the community also prevailed, indicating the deep connections between artists and community that informed the collective's decisions, with responses such as 'working artists should dominate gallery directions', that BRG be 'a base/umbrella for other activities and a resource centre for artists', that it 'remain accessible to community exhibitions e.g. mural artists', and that it 'connects with community events'.²⁵

While most responses envisioned a larger space within Canberra that continued to focus on emerging artists and the community, a few suggestions concerned BRG's place in the wider visual arts community – that BRG be 'part of an integrated network with *all* the visual arts groups in Canberra and interstate', or in a more defined way, that it be 'part of the contemporary art network undergoing radical growth'.²⁶ The response that BRG could be 'either emerging artist based, community based or part of a major contemporary art network but not both' is evidence of the respondent's broad understanding of national funding trends.²⁷

23 'Future directions', 1985.

24 'Future directions', 1985.

25 'Future directions', 1985.

26 'Future directions', 1985, original emphasis on all.

27 'Future directions', 1985.

Virgo was arguably the first person able to progress the idea of a fully funded contemporary art space in Canberra. While it is unlikely that she arrived in the city with that in mind, it is feasible that, by the end of 1984, supported by her many national professional encounters, the imminent possibility of creating such a space had taken hold. The list of 17 members who attended the 1985 forum included six current CSA students, nine working artists, a community artist/administrator who was also a member of the Arts Development Board and Virgo. Five were new members and six had been members for a year. Only four, including Cherylynn Holmes, had exhibited and become members within the first year. Virgo was the least Canberra-centric of the attendees and arguably the most aware, given her exposure through national travel, of the rapid changes occurring in the visual arts sector. It is likely that responses pointing towards BRG's inclusion in a national contemporary art network came from Virgo and, therefore, it can be assumed this meeting in mid-1985 saw a firming of her intention to further such an agenda. A number of factors, however, were yet to align.

The question of appropriate space would have been uppermost in Virgo's mind. BRG was clearly too small to accommodate any possible contemporary art space and the city, planned and constructed largely to purpose, did not provide access to suitable 'spare' real estate – unlike the warehouses of Melbourne or Sydney or the bond stores of Adelaide and Hobart – that could be re-visioned and re-purposed as centres for art. Additionally, BRG was deeply imbued with the ethos of a collectively run space. The make-up of the small group who continued to lend day-to-day assistance in the running of BRG remained somewhat unstable, but the gallery's slowly increasing annual funding, growing membership and the fact of its presence demonstrated its relevance to the sector through its five years of continuous operation.

By the end of 1985, Virgo was having trouble seeing a future for herself at BRG. When Grady resigned from his position as director of ACG – leaving the community sector in the wake of the Pascoe Report to open his eponymously titled commercial gallery in Canberra's southern suburb of Kingston – Virgo applied for and was given the ACG director's job, commencing in March 1986.²⁸ She resigned from BRG on 14 February 1986 and eX de Medici and Greg Sugden stepped temporarily into the coordinator's position. Virgo recalled the reasons for her resignation:

28 Grady was one of a number of arts workers in the ACT who resigned at the end of 1985, following widespread dissatisfaction with the ADB's handling of arts funding in the ACT; see Chapter 3.

I guess I'd done what I needed to do, it wasn't progressing anywhere, it was a bit cyclic, you know it was a limited life there and in a sense it was time for Bitumen River to die. And the energy and the enthusiasm had gone ... [I]t was time to move on.²⁹

Virgo's position as director of ACG attracted more gravitas and greater visibility than the BRG coordinator's role. Coupled with the excellent gallery facilities, it placed Virgo in a stronger position to begin progressing plans for a local contemporary art space. It was not within ACG's purview to show emerging artists and thus Virgo planned to continue its emphasis 'on local professional artists: people who have perhaps exhibited before or have been painting for a number of years'.³⁰ She stated that she was 'keen to provide gallery space for major exhibitions from contemporary art spaces and regional and State galleries'.³¹ This would indicate that she imagined the ACG as a de facto regional gallery. It would be another 12 years before CMAG, Canberra's purpose-built regional gallery, joined the city's growing collection of cultural institutions.

Erica Green, who worked under Virgo at BRG and was appointed BRG's coordinator on 1 April 1986, described 1986 as 'a year that embraced divisiveness, dialogue, rationalisation and review ... culminat[ing] in many new and exciting initiatives'.³² The gallery hosted nine solo exhibitions from local artists, the majority of whom were early career artists, rather than the current or recently graduated students from CSA whose emerging careers had been incubated at BRG.³³ Three interstate exhibitions – including the touring exhibition *Truth rules II*, the second iteration of this concept from the EAF – and three theme shows – comprising an exhibition of printed works using multiple techniques, a members' Christmas show of edible art and BRG's *5th birthday show* – completed the calendar. It was clear that the local visual arts sector was strengthening as applications from potential exhibitors continued to increase throughout the year, and Green and collective members worked to build the profile of BRG and to emphasise both growing achievements and growing need within the visual arts sector.

29 Virgo, 2013.

30 Virginia Cook, 'Director drafts policy: gallery emphasis on ACT artists', 20 March 1986, p 5.

31 *Canberra Times*, 20 March 1986.

32 BRG scrapbook, 1986.

33 The nine artists were eX de Medici (*Work saints*), Michael Cartwright (*Recent works*), Stephanie Radok (*The garden of earthly delights*), Wendy Ann Rose (*Up the garden path*), CSA graduate student Julianna Balla (*Layers within*), Jackie Gorring (*These things of mine*), Sylvia Convey (*A coloured life*), Gaynor Cardew (*The great graffiti show*), and Monica Luff (*Luminus*).

Amalgamation: from collective to contemporary art space

By the time of BRG's fifth birthday celebrations, the vote that legitimised the merger of BRG/ACG into a single contemporary art space was less than a year away. The agreement necessary to proceed with the merger was based on consultation with many parties, including BRG members, ACT Arts Development Board (ADB), the Arts Council (ACT) board and its CEO, the Australia Council's VAB, the wider ACT arts community and Canberra's art-consuming public. Virgo had strong support from Ross Wolfe, who was director of the VAB from 1983 to 1988 and who, among other 'policy initiatives of consequence', was concerned that each capital city would have a funded contemporary art space.³⁴ She could also arguably be certain of support from Green, who was her co-worker at BRG and remained her friend and confidante after Virgo's move to the ACG precipitated Green's step to the coordinator's position at BRG.

Unhappy with the proposed move were the Arts Council (ACT) – which had only recently acquired its excellently appointed new exhibition space at Gorman House, 'a space to work with that would turn many gallery directors' eyes green'³⁵ – and those members of BRG who believed that Canberra needed an artist-run space that catered for newly emerged artists and for works that would not find a home in either the commercial or funded spaces. This last, above all, was intrinsic to the ongoing ethos of BRG.

Virgo's note, in materials pertaining to the fifth birthday celebrations, gave no clue of any future plans. She wrote:

Most of my memories of Bitumen River are people, not only the visitors to the gallery but those that were involved and dedicated to the concept of an artist run space. The energies of these members built Bitumen River into a viable and valuable visual arts space, a space unique to Canberra and perhaps to Australia because we are now celebrating our fifth birthday proving that the ideals of an artists-run space can be sustained. Although I have now left Bitumen River in my capacity as Co-ordinator, I still feel

³⁴ Ross Wolfe's policy initiatives included agreements for a permanent Australian Pavilion at the *Venice biennale* and establishment of the National Exhibitions Touring Support Program (now known as National Exhibitions Touring Support (NETS) Australia).

³⁵ Cook, 20 March 1986.

very attached to that small building in the car park that was often mistaken for a toilet block and hope that in a few years' time we will be celebrating our tenth birthday.³⁶

The first public outing of the proposed idea of a merger between BRG and the ACG occurred on 21 October 1986 at a meeting at BRG convened by the Contemporary Art Space Working Group. The group included Gaynor Cardew, Sylvia Convey, Paul Costigan, de Medici, Elizabeth Frewin, Radok, Roberts, Veet Sandeha, and Virgo and was responsible for lobbying, advertising and organising the public meeting.

Arguably neither BRG members, who made up the bulk of the working group, nor the ADB, were fully aware that a contemporary art space for Canberra would mean an end to BRG. The ADB intended to fund both BRG and the ACG going forward and, on 4 December 1986, the board announced that, from a total ACT pool of \$1,105,063 in operational grants for 1987, BRG would receive \$33,000, an increase of \$5,000 on the previous year. ACG was awarded \$45,000.³⁷

Just six months after that first public meeting, the members of BRG voted in April 1987 to hand their constitution over to Virgo and the ACG, and the new organisation, CCAS, was incorporated with Virgo as its director. On the surface, the transition to a contemporary art space appeared to be both welcome and logical, reflecting what English artist, curator and writer Richard Grayson – who first came to EAF in Adelaide in 1982 – called the 'victory of contemporary art'.³⁸ There was, however, opposition from those who believed that Canberra's arts community needed an independent artist-run space. These individuals believed that the local arts community needed a messy, open, emerging arts incubator – that is, the community needed BRG. Vocal opposition came from de Medici, Roberts and Huw Davies, who photographed the crowd as the vote was taken. A hard and successful drive for membership was instituted some weeks before the vote and many of those voting in favour were new recruits. Among the naysayers, folded arms eloquently but ineffectually signified opposition to the merger.

36 BRG, '5th birthday show'.

37 Megalo was awarded \$29,000, Photo Access \$21,340 and Studio One \$25,000. Gorman House Community Arts Centre was awarded \$22,640. In all, 26 ACT arts organisations were awarded a total of \$1,105,063. The largest grant by far, \$200,000, was given to the newly formed Fortune Theatre.

38 Richard Grayson, interview with the author, 14 September 2011, Istanbul.

The opening of CCAS marked the beginning of fully funded contemporary art exhibition practice, bringing the ACT into line with each of the Australian states and their respective contemporary art spaces.³⁹

On 4 July 1987, CCAS held an opening party prior to the official opening on 10 July by Daniel Thomas, director of the Art Gallery of South Australia. In interview with the *Canberra Times*, Virgo stated that CCAS's aim was to 'facilitate and encourage a program of activities that address the concerns and issues associated with innovative and experimental contemporary visual arts practice'.⁴⁰ It planned to do so by supporting emerging and established artists, responding to the needs of its arts community, initiating activities and providing a forum for special events, lectures and discussions.⁴¹

BRG's and the ACG's existing funding became seed funding for the new organisation and the ADB announced that, from the total pool of \$1 million for the ACT for the year 1988, the operational grant extended to CCAS would be \$83,000, an increase of \$5,000 on the previous year's combined BRG and ACG grants.

The opening of CCAS thus marked the end to an ACT-based, independent, artist-run space with all of its attendant possibilities and frustrations. Six years after it opened its doors in April 1981, BRG – subsumed and renamed – entered the mainstream.

Australian writer/curator Julie Ewington,⁴² reflecting on the merger in *Art Monthly*, wrote at the end of 1987 that it provided 'one of the few admirable examples of "rationalization" here or anywhere else. The Canberra art community and its audiences have come out the richer'.

This is despite regrets I share about the immolation of the old Bitumen River and its Collective ... [T]he exhibition program has always been wonderful and wacky, a combination of work from local artists and small touring shows, a haven for group shows by recent graduates and students from the Canberra School of Art, and a focus for art community energies. Quite simply Bitumen

39 The Northern Territory established a contemporary art space, 24HR Art (now Northern Centre for Contemporary Art), in 1989.

40 *Canberra Times*, 'Contemporary art space', 9 July 1987, p. 6s.

41 *Canberra Times*, 1987.

42 Ewington was head of the Art Theory Workshop at CSA from 1986 to 1989 when she resigned to become curator of CSA's SoFA Gallery. She moved to a position at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1994, later becoming head of Australian Art at Queensland Art Gallery.

River sheltered some of the liveliest art in Canberra, and just about the only scurrilous art, thereby standing as a beacon of resistance in this sanitized city.⁴³

The crossover exhibitions at BRG and CCAS – that is, the last to be held at BRG and the first at CCAS – were *Salon coda: the making of history* (10 June – 5 July, BRG) and *Site specific city* (10 July – 2 August, CCAS). Ewington described the former as ‘typical of the Bitumen River’s style’ given its ‘less-cash-more-dash verve’.⁴⁴ *Salon coda* comprised 99 works from over 50 artists hung in the nineteenth-century salon manner. The exhibition’s title was timely: salon, from the method that ‘provided an unparalleled opportunity for seeing what was being done by nearly every artist of consequence and seeing it at the same time and place’,⁴⁵ and Coda, to mark the end of an extraordinary period in Canberra’s contemporary art history. The exhibition’s tagline referenced the preceding six years of works from BRG artists, as the artists in the exhibition were drawn from the ranks of previous exhibitors and included student artists, emerging artists, and early and mid-career artists. Arguably, outside of CSA and discounting community art exhibitions, *Salon coda* (see Figure 19) constituted the largest number of local contemporary artists yet hung in the city. ‘Unhappily, perhaps,’ wrote Ewington, ‘modern exhibition strategies ensure this is a rare opportunity.’⁴⁶

On the other side of the lake at CCAS, Gorman House, *Site specific city* exhibited the works of five BRG stalwarts: Ayres, de Medici, Radok, Roberts and Arthur Wicks (see Figure 21), represented with works on paper, installations, constructions and video. De Medici and Ayres, both emerging artists at this point, had previously specifically activated the gallery with works that provided a ‘beacon of resistance’ to Canberra audiences. Here, de Medici and Roberts contributed installations inside and across the outside wall of the gallery (See Figure 22). Wicks, an early BRG exhibitor, was an established artist who had worked in Berlin, New York and Paris, with works held in the national and many regional galleries.⁴⁷

43 Julie Ewington, ‘Canberra commentary’, *Art Monthly*, November 1987, p 16.

44 Ewington, November 1987.

45 Erica Green, ‘*Salon coda: the making of history*’, fragment, ‘Salon Coda’, CCAS archives.

46 Ewington, 1987.

47 In 2017, CCAS curator Alexander Boynes exhibited Wick’s work in *Ex machina*.

Figure 19. BRG group exhibition, *Salon coda: the making of history*, 10 June – 5 July 1987, installation photograph, detail

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

Figure 20. Exterior, BRG renamed CCAS Gallery 3

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

Figure 21. Arthur Wicks, *Mobile observatory*, wooden machine (working), main blades 4 m, total length 2 x 1.3 m, installed in gallery in *Site specific city*, CCAS group exhibition, 10 July – 2 August 1987

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

Figure 22. Artist and policeman, preparing tyre tower; tyre tower detritus installed in gallery in *Site specific city*, CCAS group exhibition, 10 July – 2 August 1987

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

During the rest of 1987, Virgo and Green began to build a combined profile as CCAS. *Site specific city* and *Salon coda* were followed by the national travelling exhibition *Domestic contradictions: perceptions of the domestic sphere* and the local *At home with Megalo maniacs*. The former was a national look at contemporary feminism curated by Ewington, organised by the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, and funded by the Australia Council's VAB. It comprised nine artists from four states – including Annie Newmarch, who had been Martin's Adelaide compatriot – with works spanning 1974 to 1987. It opened at the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art before travelling to Canberra, Shepparton and Adelaide. Works in the exhibition vigorously interrogated contemporary pressures on women's domestic life and the uncomfortable and growing intersections with public life.⁴⁸ Importantly, it showed an early commitment at CCAS to accepting national touring exhibitions.

At home with Megalo maniacs at the newly named CCAS Gallery 3 – which would be referred to as 'BRG' by Canberra's art community for some time to come, and would continue to stubbornly resist efforts to sanitise its exhibition program – exhibited six artists who worked together during the previous year at Megalo. Printmakers Costigan⁴⁹ and Cardew, together with Annie Trevillian and Angelic Oltolgyi working in textiles and Lynn Dickens and Annie Franklin in photomedia, presented a different take on the domestic. Reviewing both exhibitions, Sonia Barron was able to find common ground, conflating their disparate domestic views with a Lippard quote:

What seems to be most important in this whole matter is that we focus our eyes and our feelings upon the flashes of insight which our feminine sensitivity affords us.⁵⁰

The exhibition that followed *Domestic contradictions* constituted the only public display of a selection of works from the Parliament House collection prior to their in situ installation. Given that CCAS was relatively small and very much less physically secure than any of the national institutions, hosting *Art in architecture: selections from the new Parliament House Collection*, was a coup for the gallery. Virgo publicly

48 Artists included Elizabeth Gower, Helen Grace, Wendy Kelly, Jan Mackay, Leah MacKinnon, Margaret Morgan, Ann Newmarch, Stephen Robinson and Lynn Smith.

49 Costigan was director of Megalo during the later 1980s and visual arts representative on the ACT Cultural Council during the early 1990s.

50 Sonia Barron, 'Perceptions of domesticity', *Canberra Times*, 19 August 1987, p 29.

declared her desire to host exhibitions from other state galleries when she was appointed to ACG, but it was not until late 1987 that she achieved this. The exhibition was presented by the Parliament House Construction Authority in association with the Rotary Club of Canberra and it was opened by the Hon Stewart West, Minister for Administrative Services, on 3 September. Artists included Martin, Arthur Boyd, Robert Klippel, Grant Mudford, Sidney Nolan, Gareth Sansom, Imants Tillers, Vicki Varvaressos and Fred Williams. It provided one of the few examples of exhibitions at BRG/CCAS throughout the period covered in this history in which male artists outnumbered female artists, although it could hardly be considered as representative of local or national contemporary practice.

CCAS's next two exhibitions enlarged its horizons, cemented its links with CSA, and privileged women artists. When the gallery showed *Janenne Eaton: recent paintings* from 1–25 October, Grishin wrote that in:

presenting the first Canberra exhibition of Janenne Eaton's work, the Canberra Contemporary Art Space has staged its first significant solo exhibition in its three months of operation.⁵¹

Eaton taught de Medici drawing at CSA, won the 1987 *Canberra Times* National Art Award, and was represented at that time by Grady. According to Grishin, Eaton 'presented the work of a mature, questioning artist ... of remarkable pictorial powers and considerable spiritual insight'.⁵² Following Eaton's exhibition was *The crossing*, from two Sydney artists: Adrienne Gaha, who was artist in residence in the Painting Workshop at CSA, and Narelle Jubelin, the co-founder/co-coordinator of First Draft, an artist-run gallery in Chippendale, Sydney, with which BRG had previously exchanged exhibitions.

The decision to show senior BRG artists in the first CCAS show was inspired, and from these examples of the first exhibitions under the CCAS banner in galleries 1 and 2 at Gorman House, it is clear that Virgo successfully transitioned the Gorman House location from ACG to CCAS. Illustrating that Gallery 3 in this early period continued to function in much the same way as BRG had previously done, the *Canberra Times* 'Exhibitions list' for 29 October 1987 informed readers that 'in Gallery 3 (formerly Bitumen River Gallery) ... is a group exhibition by members of the BRG collective, titled *Nowhere Utopia*'. A photocopy exhibition investigating

51 Sasha Grishin, 'Cosmic forces that control our lives', *Canberra Times*, 15 October 1987, p 19.

52 Grishin, 1987.

Canberra's peculiarities, *Nowhere utopia* is revisited in Chapter 6 as an example of touring shows from the 1980s. The title – while reflecting Canberra's history as a largely unsuccessful utopian social experiment – acts, inchoately, as a paean to loss, a true reflection of the displacement felt by the BRG collective at the 'immolation' of their collective's home.

Notions of the collective: defining BRG

In conclusion, it is important to reflect on the notion of the collective as evidenced at BRG. This history contends that BRG is most usefully defined, considered and remembered as a collective. Virgo, in interview in 2012, objected to the definition, saying:

When I started there the organisation was already funded. To me it was always an artist-run initiative that did receive a government grant. People didn't pay to have an exhibition – it was all supported and it had a committee, like a committee of management or an honorary board of management ... so it wasn't really a collective in the true sense of collective.⁵³

Disallowing the use of the term 'collective' once funding has been received, however, has little to do with the notion of the collective as evidenced at BRG. BRG's principal *raison d'être* was to provide exhibition space for those locked out of other spaces, whose work evinced the 'lost causes of humanity'.⁵⁴ In setting up BRG (and Megalo before it) as collectives, members were following the historical precedents of oppressed peoples who have always formed groups of various kinds to gain combined strength to face their struggles. Artists with views that ran counter to established positions or to regain visibility within their society formed collectives to conduct their mission with the relative support and protection of the group.

Although by the beginning of 1984 the collective attracted local funding of \$21,000, the grant was only enough to support a small salary for a coordinator and minimal running costs. This therefore meant that the day-to-day running of the space continued to fall to the collective. Thus, CCAS operated from 1984 as a minimally funded collective, with jobs

⁵³ Anne Virgo, interview, 17 September 2013.

⁵⁴ *Canberra and District Historical Society Newsletter*, June/July 1982, p 11.

continuing to be allocated across a broad member base in spite of the small but growing amounts of funding extended to it after its first two years of operation.

Members were publicly referred to and self-identified as being the BRG collective even after BRG had been subsumed into CCAS. Virgo freely deployed the term during 1984/85 while working with the collective and then directly after amalgamation in the press release that announced *Nowhere utopia* as 'a group exhibition by members of the BRG collective'.⁵⁵

The BRG community's self-identification as a collective is referred to in numerous general meeting notes over the period. Point one of the minutes from the general meeting of 19 members on 20 October 1982 states: 'That even though a co-ordinator is to be appointed, the collective is still valid for all major decision making, and through working in all the various sub-committees.'⁵⁶ A year later, minutes from the general meeting of Sunday 7 August 1983, under 'Any other business', state that a 'Process of "intuitive consensus" be upheld'.⁵⁷ Among the possible futures envisaged during the 1984 *Future directions forum* were that 'an active collective would be reflected in BRG'.⁵⁸ De Medici, co-opted by Ayres onto the management committee of BRG after returning to Canberra from Brisbane in early 1984, remembers that BRG was 'called a collective', even though by September that year it was an incorporated association: 'The membership was functioning as a collective where everything's shared. You just did it as a group because it had to be done.'⁵⁹ Printmaker and BRG member Deej Fabyc, commenting during BRG's fifth birthday on the collective mindset, wrote: 'I believe in working against the dominant ideology whenever I can ... I was involved in BRG because ... artist run galleries are important.'⁶⁰ Finally – as previously noted – Ewington, in reviewing the crossover exhibitions after amalgamation, lamented the 'immolation' of the 'BRG collective'.⁶¹

55 *Nowhere utopia*, media release, March 1987, CCAS scrapbook, 1987, CCAS archives.

56 BRG meeting minutes, 20 October 1982, 'Meeting minutes, 1982', CCAS archives.

57 BRG meeting minutes, 7 August 1983, 'Meeting minutes, 1983', CCAS archives.

58 BRG 'Future directions forum' minutes, May 1984, 'Future directions, 1984', CCAS archives.

59 eX de Medici, interview with the author, 9 April 2012.

60 BRG, '5th birthday show'.

61 Ewington, 1987.

The contention that BRG was not a collective in the true sense disavows both the collective ethos that drove its founding and BRG's continued focus on work that manifested the concerns of marginalised groups. Artist and art critic Mark Alice Durant writes that a community-based art collective 'gives voice to the voiceless'.⁶² BRG showed the work of minorities who would otherwise have remained invisible within Canberra's available exhibition spaces, including Indigenous artists, intellectually and physically disabled children, and other socially and economically marginalised groups. That ethos remained alive throughout 1984 and 1985 during Virgo's role as coordinator, and up to and for a brief time after the merger. Indeed, pockets of resistance continued to surface right through to 1994.

Ultimately, it is BRG's locus as a continued point of resistance throughout the period from foundation to after amalgamation, together with an unbroken line of collective decision-making and job-sharing processes, that defines BRG as a collective. In interview, Virgo warned generally against romanticising the gallery's memory, but it is equally impossible to overstate the importance of BRG in the development of contemporary art in Canberra.⁶³ Its mission was to show art of the moment, made by those at the forefront of, and agitating for, social and economic change. Many of those who first exhibited with BRG would go on to become senior figures in the local, national and international art communities. Throughout the period from the late 1970s up to the early 2000s, their work bore witness to the movement of contemporary alternative art from the margins to the mainstream.

62 Mark Alice Durant, 'Activist art in the shadow of rebellion', *Art in America*, 80, July 1992, pp 31–35.

63 Virgo, 2013.

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