6

TRANSFORMATION: TRANSCENDING THE LOCAL

Trevor Smith's appointment as director of Canberra Contemporary Art Space (CCAS) in 1994, and his curatorial decisions during his first year, reflected international paradigmatic changes around the definition and role of the curator. These changes began to manifest from the 1970s, in exhibitions developed by Swiss curator Harald Szeemann from 1969 and Australian curator Daniel Thomas from 1972. By the late 1980s, as 'curators began more and more to be creatively and conceptually involved in the making of exhibitions' and professional roles changed accordingly, the professionalisation of curatorial practice was reflected in new academic courses.¹ JJ Charlesworth has written that 'the term "curator" has been around for as long as there were bodies of objects and bodies of knowledge to preserve and perpetuate'.² By the mid-1990s, however, curators had

1 'The formalized study of curating first properly emerged at the École du Magasin in Grenoble, France, in 1987 with a 10-month course dedicated to curatorship. This was followed by a permanent two-year Master's degree course at the Royal College of Art in London in 1992. These programs recognized the importance of curatorship and heralded a new place for the curator – emphasizing the position's essential responsibility in the creation of an exhibition or display' (Alice Pfeiffer, 'Delving into the art of curating: as job enjoys a star turn, several new degrees offer "a passport for life"', *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), 11 October 2012, p 202). Jens Hoffman, 'The next *Documenta* should be curated by an artist', 2002, quoted in Nicola Trezzi, 'The art of curating', *Flash Art International*, 45, March/April 2010, pp 62–66.

2 JJ Charlesworth, 'Curating doubt', *Art Monthly*, 294, March 2006, p 1.

transitioned from their supportive role in developing collections and exhibitions to acting as, and importantly being perceived as, cultural protagonists in their creative exhibition-making.³

Among others who have written on these decades of transition is American arts writer Nicola Trezzi, who identified the curatorial shift as a move to 'the practice of curating as an art in its own right, with its own structure and language'.⁴ Trezzi writes of the 'passage from a historical, "temporal" perception ... to a "spatial" understanding of art'.⁵ In other words, a move away from curating as being solely aligned to the academic discipline of art history towards an approach dominated by artists and other multidisciplinary practitioners. This change was apparent internationally as the 1990s progressed through the rapid growth of biennales of contemporary art with governing bodies that extended curatorial invitations to artists and when artists began curating satellite exhibitions during biennales.⁶ In Australia in 2002, Richard Grayson was invited to curate Sydney's biennale, (*The world may be*) *fantastic*.⁷ As well, in the mid-2000s, the Australia Council instituted a funded program that invited international curators to tour Australian art spaces in order to assist in expanding the local understanding of the role of the curator and positively impact international perceptions of Australian artists.

3 In 1990 artist and founding director Jeffrey Moore of Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum (established 1986) in San Antonio, Texas, convened a workshop to answer questions about the notion of the curator within the contemporary art space and the curator's relationship to artists and exhibitions. The questions were reflective of a growing liminality around the role and included: 'What is a curator? What does he or she do? What is the role of the curator in the art community? Why does someone have the right to call himself or herself a curator? Why is this or that curator's taste better than mine? Is it who you know? In other words, does a buddy system between curators and favorite artists exist? Do curators have a responsibility to exhibit artists from their own communities? How do the duties, goals, etc. of a museum curator differ from those of a director/curator at an alternative space? How do the local arts community, the size of the exhibition space, etc. influence curatorial decisions?' This chapter illustrates how the spirit of these questions manifested at CCAS.

4 Trezzi, 2015.

5 Trezzi, 2015.

6 This relatively new field of scholarly enquiry into the artist as curator is examined by Costa Rican curator Jens Hoffman in 'The art of curating and the curating of art' (*The utopian display platform*, Milan, Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti Milano). See also, Elena Filipovic, 'When exhibitions become form: on the history of the artist as curator, *Mousse*, 41, moussemagazine.it/taac0/, accessed 4 August 2016.

7 Grayson was one of a handful of artist/curators at the forefront of the discipline's rapidly changing construct in contemporary art in the 1990s. (*The world may be*) *fantastic* included 'quirky and unpredictable' artists from 21 countries. Grayson stated that his artistic intention was to 'look at "approaches that are fantastic, partial, various, suggestive, ambitious, subjective, wobbly and eccentric to normal orbits"' (Michael Duncan, 'Report from Sydney: self-created worlds', *Art in America*, 90, 10, 2002, pp 60–65).

At CCAS, this change was manifested through the appointment of Jane Barney as curator in 1995, whose own curatorial trajectory emanated from her arts practice.

Along with these paradigmatic changes in curatorial process, Smith's appointment occurred during the decade in which contemporary art spaces in Australia were seeking to establish identities that distinguished them from the collective artist-run spaces of the 1970s and 1980s. By the beginning of the 1990s, having successfully transitioned to funded organisations, the inexorable tendency towards expansion foregrounded the desire for further legitimisation for contemporary art spaces. This tendency became intrinsically connected to the requirement to show funding bodies, tangible need for increased support.

Having completed the first step in this larger acceptance of contemporary art, contemporary art spaces looked forward. The art museum, exclusion from which had provided the impetus for establishing the collective artist-run spaces that gave rise to contemporary art spaces, continued to provide an aspirational model. This desire for legitimacy by alternative artists was present from the 1970s, a period that Grayson recalled as one where alternative artists, relegated to basements and clubs, would walk past the art museums dreaming of a day when their art would be hung on art museum walls.⁸

As a result of this relentless drive towards ever larger models of institutionalisation, tensions arose between contemporary art space directors and the boards who supported continued growth, and local emerging and established contemporary artists who needed contemporary art spaces to enable the development and showing of new works that fell outside the exhibition parameters of the commercial galleries and art museums. A particular example of this is Sydney artist Dale Frank's exhibition *Satellite of love*, co-curated by Smith and the artist, and shown at CCAS in association with the National Gallery of Australia's exhibition *Virtual reality* over the summer of 1994/95.

The structure of the contemporary art space during the 1980s allowed for an intense, personal, start-to-finish engagement with exhibiting artists. This 'grassroots' curatorial input had a decisive impact on the growth of contemporary art practice and its increased visibility within the community.

8 Grayson, 2011.

The position of the director/curator provided an opportunity to broadly affect the contemporary arts milieu. During the 1990s, this position became increasingly critical to the success or otherwise of contemporary art spaces in general. One of the changes in curatorial practice during the 1990s was that, while contemporary art spaces continued to exhibit artists excluded from the mainstream, by the mid-1990s the focus was moving to artists who were very much included. The mark of an effective curator became about the quality of artists that could be attracted to the contemporary art space.

Previous chapters explored the roles of coordinators and the collective in two quite different iterations of the space: the collective, and the funded organisation. These chapters consider the institutionalisation of the space and what effects this had on the exhibition of contemporary art in the capital, as the culture of the collective, artist-run space transformed to a fully funded and administered contemporary art space. One consequence of this more highly administered structure was that successive boards came to play an increasingly important role in decision-making, particularly in setting different curatorial agendas through the hiring of directors. At the end of 1993, the CCAS board sought to bring the organisation into line with changing national and international curatorial parameters by hiring a director whose focus would transform the organisation.

A new direction: Trevor Smith

After almost 10 years in arts management in Canberra, inaugural CCAS director Anne Virgo began transitioning to a new life in Melbourne. The experienced administrator and artist Brenda Runnegar stepped into the role of acting director, supported by CCAS members. In October 1993, the CCAS board – which then included Christopher Chapman (chair); Deborah Clark (secretary); and, from the Canberra School of Art (CSA), artist/lecturers David Watt, Ruth Waller, Pam Debenham, Martyn Jolly and Anna Eggert – accepted Virgo's resignation and advertised the director's position.

The board's membership reflected the paradigmatic changes occurring throughout the 1980s as collective artist-run spaces transitioned to funded contemporary art spaces. Board members were educated and progressive arts professionals who supported the contemporary art space model. Six years and three months had passed since amalgamation and, with CCAS now

established as the principal conduit for the exhibition of contemporary art in Canberra, the board sought a new type of director/curator who would bring national experience and international perspectives to the organisation and therefore to the capital's contemporary arts community.⁹

A nationally placed advertisement, 'seeking a Director with substantial curatorial, managerial and administrative abilities', required that, along with 'relevant tertiary qualifications in Contemporary Art History, Practice or Administration', the applicant should have 'a demonstrated ability to effectively liaise with government funding agencies, corporate and community organisations, all levels of the art museum and gallery profession, and especially artists'.¹⁰ The position attracted a salary of \$36,638–\$40,946 per annum, more than twice the annual salary of \$15,000 offered 10 years previously for the coordinator's position at BRG.¹¹

The interviews took place over a day at CSA, in a room whose long windows revealed the length of Childers Street. As Jolly recalled it, towards day's end, he looked up and out through the windows to see a tall, dark-haired man, 'striding with great energy and purpose' towards the school's entrance.¹² This, it transpired, was Smith. Successful in interview, he was appointed as CCAS director at the end of 1993. He commenced a three-year term on 9 March 1994,¹³ by which time Runnegar – CCAS's highly experienced administrator of eight years – had been acting director for the five months since Virgo's move to the Australian Print Workshop (APW) in Melbourne.

9 Deborah Clark, at that time chair of CCAS, conversation with the author, March 2013.

10 'Gallery co-ordinator', advertisement, *Canberra Times*, 25 September 1993, p 10s.

11 'Gallery co-ordinator', advertisement, *Canberra Times*, 5 November 1983, p 28.

12 Martyn Jolly, conversation with the author, October 2014.

13 The *Canberra Times* welcomed Smith in print a full month before he arrived (Robert Macklin, 'A capital life', *Canberra Times*, 5 February 1994, p 49), attributing Mark Dubner's exhibition, *The querulous quest of quiff*, to Smith. Perhaps the title and the subject matter – 'humour, pathos and sexuality are used within a narrative structure to illustrate the protagonist's travails' – sounded like something a young Canadian contemporary art space director would come up with? In fact, this exhibition was organised some months before Virgo's resignation. Smith's appointment was ultimately announced under the headline 'New director for Contemporary Art Space', giving his starting date as 9 March 1994 (*Canberra Times*, 28 February 1994, p 11). On Thursday 17 March, the Board of Management held meet-and-greet drinks in the gallery for Smith, prior to the opening of the touring exhibition *Queerography*.

Following Smith's appointment, arts journalist Helen Musa identified an initial feeling of surprise among the local arts community, reporting in *Muse* in March 1994 that 'As a Canadian trained overseas [Smith's] appointment may at first appear surprising'.¹⁴ Smith was 29 years old when he arrived in Canberra, having graduated with a BA in art history from the University of British Columbia in 1986, and then working as a curatorial assistant at the Mackenzie Art Gallery, established in 1953 in Regina, the capital of Canadian province Saskatchewan. After moving to Sydney with his Australian wife, he spent 18 months as site manager at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) for Sydney's ninth biennale (1992/93). This engagement, *Muse* reported, 'obviously gave him a valuable insight into the contemporary art scene here in Australia'.¹⁵

The use of the word 'obviously' may have been somewhat tongue-in-cheek; Smith's brief exposure to Australian art since his arrival in the country was largely Sydney-centric. Both his Canadian training and employment and his biennale engagement, however, were important factors in the board's decision to hire him and greatly influenced his curatorial decisions over his three years at CCAS. He had, firstly, a demonstrated commitment to the exhibition of Indigenous art. The Mackenzie Art Gallery had a proud record of achievement as a leader in First Nation exhibitions. Smith's time there, the recent foregrounding of Australian Indigenous art through Australia's 1988 bicentenary, as well as his Sydney gallery connections, contributed to his curatorial commitment to Indigenous art. Secondly, Smith worked with and must have been influenced by Anthony Bond, artistic director of the 1992/93 *Biennale of Sydney*, who sought to 'expand the understanding of Internationalism' in his selection of 'mainstream artists' and 'emerging artists from beyond the traditional centres'.¹⁶ Thirdly, Chapman's position as CCAS chair and connection to Frank and the Sydney gallery scene meant that the two shared similar concerns and interests and were able to collaborate on *Satellite of love* over the 1995/96 summer. Smith's high energy and internationalist viewpoint were exactly the qualities the board sought, qualities that outweighed his lack of local knowledge, restricted Australian art knowledge and inexperience as a director.¹⁷

14 *Muse*, March 1994.

15 *Muse*, March 1994.

16 Anthony Bond, 'The boundary rider', foreword, catalogue, *9th Biennale of Sydney* (1992/93).

17 Smith derived, in a sense, his regional service from his tenure at CCAS, enabling him to apply for and accept a position three years later as curator of contemporary art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

By the time Smith arrived, the bulk of the 1994 exhibition program was in place at both Gorman House and at the Manuka space. The program included receiving (as opposed to sending out) international and national touring exhibitions; exhibitions from queer and outsider artists; sculpture and performance exhibitions; and continued forums on arts connectedness and the state of the arts in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). A period in July was set aside for the new director's first exhibition.

Romantisystem

Smith's Sydney connections were a strong contributing factor to his curatorial decisions at CCAS. His first exhibition, three-and-a-half months after arrival, was the group show *Romantisystem*, which hung in the Gorman House gallery from 1–31 July. According to its press release, the exhibition explored 'the intermingling of subjective and systematic approaches to artmaking'¹⁸ and featured 14 artists from Canberra and 'around Australia'. Of the artists in the exhibition, Rosalie Gascoigne and Neil Roberts were from Canberra, and Robert MacPherson was from Brisbane. The balance included Sydney artists Paul Saint, Ian Burn, Maria Cruz, Bronwyn Clark-Coolee, Matthys Gerber, Lindy Lee, Ruark Lewis, Euan McDonald, Susan Norrie, Jacqueline Rose and sculptor Kathy Temin. Smith's selection of artists, who were mainly luminaries of the Sydney gallery scene, speaks to the change occurring in curatorial practice by which a curator's worth was judged by the quality of artists he or she could attract to an exhibition.

During the 1990s the exhibition catalogue also assumed a heightened importance within exhibitions. The press release for *Romantisystem* promised 'A post-event catalogue of the exhibition ... including essays and installation photographs'.¹⁹ Although in this instance the catalogue failed to materialise, it nonetheless retained a sort of ghost-life throughout the exhibition, featuring, in its non-presence, in the many reviews that *Romantisystem* generated.²⁰ Faced with a somewhat curly curatorial

18 *Romantisystem*, media release, 21 June 1994, '*Romantisystem*', CCAS archives.

19 *Romantisystem*, 1994.

20 Sasha Grishin, reviewing Ruth Waller and Tess Horwitz's October 1995 exhibition at CCAS for the *Canberra Times*, acerbically wrote at the end of that review, 'I still have not seen the catalogue for the *Romantisystem* which the curator Trevor Smith promised to issue to explain his thinking behind the exhibition. A year has passed so I have stopped holding my breath' ('Conventional departures', *Canberra Times*, 24 October 1995, p 18).

premise and with this 'catalogue to come' promise central to the press release and exhibition, and additionally without wall text or other textual markers, local reviewers Peter Haynes, Sasha Grishin and Kerry-Anne Cousins rose to the exhibition's challenge with mixed responses.

Haynes' review in *Art and Australia* comprised one of a slowly increasing number of texts in national art magazines about Canberra's local art scene, reflecting the growth of the visual arts sector and its increasing national penetration. Haynes began and ended his review with comments relating to the absence of a catalogue and he elliptically wrote that, because of this absence, 'the works in the exhibition therefore operated as illustrations for an unarticulated text which paradoxically opened them to a wider dialogue about the nature of (some) contemporary art practice'. What are we to make of Haynes' comments that 'the clues though, are those plastic expressions deployed around the gallery space and it is precisely these which Smith used as the unarticulated text'? Does Haynes mean that the works speak for themselves? Concluding, 'we must engage directly with the works if we are to begin to understand the impulse for Smith's curatorial premise', Haynes seemed relieved that there was no catalogue, as 'too often the text becomes the exhibition'.

Discussing a work by Roberts, Haynes wrote that 'Within a minimal, formal vocabulary he creates a highly expressive amalgam theoretically contradictory to its imposed limitations'. 'Other artists [in the exhibition],' he continued, 'adopt an assertively interrogative approach to the art history of which they are a part', citing Norrie, Lee and Rose (three of the six woman artists in the exhibition) as 'clear though complex examples of this'. Haynes concluded that the exhibition's 'challenge' was 'the directness of the confrontation offered by the works chosen by the curator. Its meaning lay in this challenge and *not* in the unseen/unread verbal defence'.²¹ This review, while it indicated a willingness to engage with Smith's curatorial premise, was ambivalent.

Grishin, a regular visitor to national and international galleries, wrote for the *Canberra Times* that "'Romantisystem" is a curious word invented to describe a curious exhibition representing the work of 15 artists, most of whom are from Sydney'. He reminded readers that most artists were well known to Canberra audiences, thus underscoring the art literacy of the 1994 population, but was largely unmoved by the curatorial premise:

21 Peter Haynes, 'Antisystem', *Art and Australia*, 32, 3, 1995, p 444. Emphasis in original.

While it is difficult not to be impressed by this selection of some very fine work in a wide range of mediums, even if much of it is predictable in its unconventional properties, the lack of surprises or startling discoveries makes this for me a somewhat directionless exhibition, a show case rather than an argument.

Grishin illuminated Smith's curatorial premise for *Canberra Times* readers in writing that the exhibition:

is built around the notion of a dialectic between what could be termed a subjective approach to art making and a systematic approach ... The two are generally viewed as antithetic to one another, and the curator ... has attempted to set up unexpected contrasts and oppositions to form new relationships between the works ... Without the assistance of a wall text or catalogue (although one is promised for September), the beholder is thrown in to the exhibition to form his or her own associations and interpretations of the curatorial intent. This is only a partly satisfactory approach.²²

What is interesting about these critical reviews is their charting of the mixed community reception surrounding this change in the presentation of contemporary art in Canberra. The lack of a catalogue and wall texts as a point of contention in Haynes', Grishin's, and in Kerry-Anne Cousins' review (a discussion of which follows) masks what was really happening. The change in emphasis from local to national during Smith's directorship occurred a short time after Canberra artists had succeeded in carving out their local identity from within the cultural and funding imperatives of a national capital space. Some members of Canberra's arts community were understandably reluctant to relinquish this local focus in favour of national representations. Smith had, however, been hired to bring art within the local space into line with national curatorial and exhibition agendas. His perceived radical approach, which was brought to the fore with this exhibition, was not well understood within the local context in this first showing of his curatorial intent. As a sign of Canberra's growing maturity, however, his effort was appreciated. Cousins' review sums up this dichotomy of confusion and support.

22 Sasha Grishin, 'No discoveries in a "showcase" display', *Canberra Times*, 26 July 1994, p 16.

Reviewing for the August edition of *Muse*, Cousins felt the lack of supporting documentation made the exhibition unnecessarily opaque to viewers:

Smith suggests that two traditionally opposing artistic approaches can be present together in the same artist's work ... Unfortunately this is not communicated to the viewer who is required to accept these theories without being given the necessary background knowledge to take part in the debate.

Cousins believed that the terminology lacked 'any clear definition'. With the title eliding 'Romanticism' and 'systemic', she wondered if the Romanti[cism] of the title was 'used in an art historical sense' or if it was 'equated, as it appears to be in this context, with expressionism'? Cousins pointed out that, while systemic related to 1950s/60s American colour field painting, Smith equated the term with a 'cool and impersonal' artistic choice. Cousins claimed that without any explanation of the terms:

the point of the exhibition's unifying theme becomes lost and meaningless. Paradoxically, the catalogue in which all these ideas may have been able to be discussed at greater length and presumably be made clear, will not be appearing until later.

Despite these reservations, Cousins concluded that the exhibition was:

one of the best surveys we have had in Canberra recently of contemporary art trends ... It is to be welcomed that [Smith] is looking towards creating an exciting, interesting and thought provoking forum for contemporary art in Canberra.²³

Romantisystem highlighted emerging problems that were connected to the appointment of an inexperienced director. These included a lack of record-keeping and a perceived disconnect between the CCAS charter and its implementation, which in itself was a clear marker of the tensions surrounding the changing identity of contemporary art spaces nationally. The former manifested early in the media release with errors relating to artists' names and the total number of exhibiting artists, the decision to do away with a visitors' book – which precludes an examination of public response to this and other exhibitions in Smith's first year, the lack of wall texts and the non-appearance of the catalogue. Although these could be explained by a postmodern anti-systems bent, they are more likely due to

23 Kerry-Anne Cousins, 'Art', *Muse*, August 1994.

the new director's administrative inexperience, the lack of staff at the time within CCAS and of funding alternatives to pay for an accompanying catalogue.²⁴ It is likely that Smith – having come from a commercial, highly resourced, Sydney contemporary arts scene – would have believed that the national capital would deliver a similarly resourced contemporary arts milieu.

Cousins' comments welcomed *Romantisystem* as heralding a wider contemporary arts dialogue, thus underscoring one of the board's primary reasons for hiring Smith. However, the privileging of Sydney's commercially successful artists sat uncomfortably with some CCAS members and pointed to a lack of understanding concerning the previously accepted CCAS core policy of supporting local emerging artists. eX de Medici believed that the contemporary art space charter was to:

promote the work of emerging artists, not promote the work of commercially successful artists from very successful hard-core commercial galleries. It's sort of like a cultural cringe inside another cultural cringe inside another one whereas I believe the Bitumen River Gallery didn't really care about those debates at all.²⁵

De Medici's multiple iterations of 'cultural cringe' identified national and local tendencies to validate, as culture, that which came from outside. In the first instance (as examined in Chapter 2 in the context of national arts funding), the cringe as an Australian phenomenon speaks to the national tendency that – until the rise of a Labor government under Gough Whitlam in the early 1970s – classed culture as that which came specifically from England.²⁶ Locally, the cringe referenced the trend that saw successive intakes of graduating students from CSA leave Canberra after graduation to make their careers in southern capitals, particularly Melbourne; many of the founding members of the Bitumen River Gallery (BRG) collective had left the Territory by mid-1984 to further their careers. De Medici's third iteration of the cringe draws attention to the culture she saw developing within CCAS; this was reflected more widely in the national contemporary art spaces that eschewed exhibiting work by local contemporary artists in favour of those from other Australian

²⁴ Smith is now a highly respected and experienced curator of contemporary art with more than 25 years' experience. He is currently curator of the *Present tense* initiative at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.

²⁵ De Medici, 2012.

²⁶ AA Phillips, 'The cultural cringe', *Meanjin*, 9, 4, 1950, pp 299–302.

capitals, especially Sydney. This speaks again to the growing tendency of the curator as star and the quality of that curator being verified in the quality of artists they attracted.

There is no doubting Smith's energy and optimism, nor the local arts community's efforts to make him welcome. Interviewed by Musa at the end of July and asked how he was settling in, he replied 'Obviously, it has been a huge learning curve, but people have been generous ... [T]hey mightn't agree, but there is a willingness to be open to possibilities'.²⁷ During his first active year in the local arts community he was interviewed regularly on local radio 2xx; opened the mid-year graduate diploma exhibition at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery in August, the ANCA tenants' exhibition in September, and an exhibition at Jardine Gallery in October; chaired panels; spoke at conferences; and instituted a program of studio visits to local artists in an effort to get an overview of current arts practice in the ACT.

Satellite of love

A powerful example of Smith's curatorial intent occurred at the end of 1994, when Canberra's contemporary arts consumers were invited to take a bold leap into the conceptual contemporary. Frank's solo exhibition *Satellite of love* (see Figure 23) garnered reviews that indicated some critical resistance to continued theoretically conceptual work from interstate artists. The exhibition was installed at CCAS from 11 December 1994 to 29 January 1995. At the same time, from 10 December 1994 to 5 February 1995, Frank was included in the group exhibition *Virtual reality* at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA). *Satellite of love* and Frank's works in *Virtual reality* provide a comprehensive example of the differences in curatorial possibilities between CCAS and NGA during this period; while Frank's works at NGA could have migrated across to CCAS, *Satellite of love* could not have been shown at NGA. This is mainly because exhibits in *Satellite of love* were designed to cause perceptible and, at times, negative physical impacts on viewers. Equally, these concurrent exhibitions illustrate the particularity of Canberra's small and interconnected arts community, which made curatorial collaboration possible – in this instance, between those working within the institutional museum model on one hand and within the contemporary art space model on the other.

27 Helen Musa, 'Drawing an artists' map for Canberra', *Canberra Times*, 31 July, 1994, p 24.

Figure 23. Dale Frank, *Satellite of love*, CCAS, 11 December 1994 – 29 January 1995, installation photograph

Source. Photographer: Brenton McGeachie. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

Chapman, then an assistant curator in Australian art at the NGA, provided the critical collaborative link in assisting Mary Eagle, the curator of *Virtual reality*. Chapman was chairman of the CCAS board when Smith was hired and the two shared an interest in contemporary theories and conceptual art, and they were both passionate supporters of Frank's work.²⁸ Frank's Sydney gallerist, Roslyn Oxley, supplied a number of the artists for Smith's *Romantisystem* exhibition earlier that year. Smith, wrote an essay for the *Virtual reality* catalogue,²⁹ and Chapman wrote the catalogue essay for *Satellite of love*³⁰ and the Frank essay in the *Virtual reality* catalogue. The exhibitions were billed as being 'in association with' each other.

28 Christopher Chapman, 'Dale Frank and the Diamond Dogs', in *Virtual reality*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra, National Gallery of Australia, 1994.

29 Trevor Smith, 'Ronald Jones: contagion cultures', in *Virtual reality*, 1994.

30 Christopher Chapman, 'Reality used to be a friend of mine', *Satellite of love*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra, CCAS, 1994, np.

The exhibition signalled CCAS's emergence as a relevant national contemporary arts space. By 1994, Frank was widely known for his conceptual, performative, mercurial and challenging art practice. *Satellite of love* approached the apogee of conceptual art practice in Australia at the time, with a mix of objects with conceptual links that proved challenging to reviewers, audiences and gallery staff (see below). A wish list from the artist to Smith, written some weeks before installation, exemplifies Frank's free-ranging, fearless, associative approach. Despite these inherent challenges, Smith and Chapman were able to mediate the installation process to successful conclusion.

Once again, the local critical reception to Smith's curatorial intent indicated a residual intolerance to theoretically challenging contemporary art from a non-Canberra-based artist. The November media release informed readers that 'automobiles, family snapshots [and] bodies' would be 'touchstones' in the body of work and that a 32-page colour catalogue would be available at the opening. Chapman's catalogue essay was contentious for Sonia Barron, who reviewed the exhibition for the *Canberra Times* in January 1995. Barron wrote that Chapman had gone to 'extraordinary lengths to justify, in terms of current and not-so-current art practices and theoretical writings, what I can only describe as a deliberate assault on the senses'. Thinking at first that she had walked into a 'post Christmas disaster site', Barron concluded:

After reading the catalogue and looking again, it all became a bit nasty and a deadly serious mind-bending exercise. The artist as victim, or a proxy for perceived social ills, is a fashionable posture. The twist with this installation is that the viewer is being deliberately victimised by the artist.³¹

Barron picked up on the artist's use of the word 'victimisation', as quoted in Chapman's catalogue essay;³² arguably, in this instance, the word victim has been hijacked in service to the reviewer's negative response. Rather than viewers being 'deliberately victimised'; however, the artist was hoping to engage the audience in a duologue. In a fax to Chapman, Frank wrote, 'All participants in this work including the audience could be seen as part of the terrorism/victimisation here. The roles are not clear'.³³ The review indicates that Frank, whose work is essentially 'concerned with

31 Sonia Barron, 'Viewers are deliberately victimised', *Canberra Times*, 13 January 1995, p 12.

32 Chapman, *Satellite of love*, 1994.

33 Chapman, *Satellite of love*, 1994.

notions of the physical, the physiological and psychological',³⁴ succeeded, as Chapman writes, in his aim of '[creating] a shift in perception which is actualised and apprehended directly by the viewer ... [An intense experience] we are unfamiliar with and deeply unsure of'.³⁵ Chapman believed that, in reference to the viewer, 'What is at stake is the possibility of complete surrender'.³⁶ Frank's purpose was, therefore, not to victimise the audience but to continue to explore the very concept of reality and to push the boundaries of conceptual art practice in the interests of this exploration. In fact, his aim was to invite the audience, in the most visceral way, to act as a participant in this questioning of reality.

An unexpected consequence of the exhibition was that it led to a formalising of management's responsibilities to gallery visitors. The 17 works on the final exhibition list for *Satellite of love* are essentially not very different from the wish list Frank faxed to Smith in November 1994. Components of works included 'a small colony of red-back spiders' and 'chemically active paint'.³⁷ At the last minute,³⁸ exhibit no 17, *For John (no, not John N.) this is not a disco, I'm only dancing* (disc-jockey, living sculpture, music, lights, atmospheric fog), was dropped, as the requirement to have a live DJ and a 'living sculpture' in residence throughout the life of the exhibition proved impossible to accommodate.³⁹ Elements of the exhibition were contentious, including no 7, *Tolerance + acceptance – Fatima's global cannon with the allure and acid of the fat cow's afterbirth*, which constituted a hip-high swimming pool with a slick of varnish covering the water's surface. The ACT Department of Health directed the work be removed shortly into the exhibition's run after the water began to evaporate, the varnish fumes permeated the gallery and several staff members experienced headaches and nausea.

34 Chapman, *Satellite of love*, 1994.

35 Chapman, *Satellite of love*, 1994.

36 Chapman, *Satellite of love*, 1994.

37 'List of works', *Satellite of love*, CCAS.

38 Room sheets have exhibits no 7 and no 17 ruled through with black lines.

39 Exhibit no 15, *Untitled (for Christopher) – after Joseph Beuys* (television monitor, VCR, selection of four videos – *The abyss*, *Point break*, *Starman*, *The last American hero*), is a homage to Chapman who has written extensively on Frank's oeuvre.

CCAS chairperson (1994–95) Deborah Clark understatedly writes in her 1995 report that '*Satellite of love* proved to be something of a learning experience for all concerned'.⁴⁰ The Department of Health's intervention led to CCAS developing a draft health and safety policy at the beginning of 1995:

Recognising the hazards occurring in the arts industry, the CCAS will take every practicable step to provide and maintain a safe and healthy work environment for all employees. Although the CCAS exists to promote and support experimental art practices, when proposed work includes potentially noxious substances or other elements which may have a deleterious effect upon the workplace environment, this must be taken into consideration in the assessment of exhibition proposals.⁴¹

Despite the exhibition's critical reception, and irrespective of the scandal associated with the Department of Health's removal of exhibit no 7 and the artist's unhappiness with that intervention, *Satellite of love* was a memorable harbinger of change in the history of contemporary art exhibition in Canberra.

Smith came to Canberra with some international experience, a sound knowledge of contemporary theories and a brief but intense exposure to Sydney's contemporary arts milieu. His first solo year could not have been an easy transition for him and was obviously not for some others, including incumbent CCAS staff and those members who were committed to the local model. It can be argued, however, that this same lack of experience allowed him to move beyond the status quo of the nationally accepted, bureaucratised, contemporary art space model that was in place by 1994. By not understanding that status quo and by virtue of having only had 18 months of experience in Australia, Smith was less likely to be burdened by the accepted/expected paradigm.

At the heart of Smith's lukewarm reception from some quarters was an unshakeable belief that the contemporary art space model's primary agency was in its privileging of local emerging and mid-career contemporary artists. In hiring Smith, however, the CCAS board flagged a desire for a more internationalist curatorial approach to inject a contemporary theoretical component into the CCAS exhibition calendar.

40 Deborah Clark, 'CCAS Chairperson's report 1995', 1995 scrapbook, CCAS archives.

41 'Draft Health and Safety Policy', 7 February, 1995 scrapbook.

Ultimately, *Romantisystem* and *Satellite of love* were a distinct alternative to all that had gone before. They provided a permissive model for the flowering of performative and travelling exhibitions that Barney, as assistant curator and then as director, instituted from 1995 to 2002. Barney defined Smith as ‘hard-core, deeply passionate about contemporary art. He swept away any cobwebs or conservatism that may have crept into the program’.⁴² This ‘passionate’ commitment to difficult contemporary art set the tone for the next period at CCAS.

With Smith’s appointment, the CCAS board fulfilled their criteria of positioning CCAS as nationally relevant within a rapidly changing sector. They were so successful in this endeavour that, 12 months after Smith’s appointment, they were forced to make another appointment. The following section investigates Barney’s appointment and her local focus, which acted as a balance to Smith’s internationalism.

Jane Barney

By November 1994, the CCAS board was grappling with a breakdown in the relationship between Runnegar and Smith.⁴³ Ill-suited professionally, their relationship deteriorated over the months leading up to November. Vivienne Binns, living in Canberra and teaching at CSA, joined the board in 1994 and remembers that Runnegar and Smith were ‘like chalk and cheese, really different, really didn’t understand one another’.⁴⁴ Smith’s postmodern, internationalised, urban conceptualism and Runnegar’s local community orientation were deeply at odds: ‘she didn’t like or understand what he wanted to do and he didn’t like her style and what she was doing and there just developed a standoff’.⁴⁵ With a great deal of experience leading community organisations through successful creative endeavours, Binns and Clark took on the responsibility of negotiating a détente. The board verbally supported both Runnegar and Smith for their different but equally valuable approaches and required that Smith take separate management/coaching classes. Binns arranged mediation sessions for the

42 Jane Barney, interview with the author, 19 September 2012.

43 Runnegar was CCAS administrator for eight years and acting director on a number of occasions, including during the eight months prior to Smith’s appointment. At the end of 1993, Runnegar endured the disappointment of being overlooked for the director’s position in favour of Smith.

44 Binns, 2012.

45 Binns, 2012.

two and 'smoothed things over'.⁴⁶ She believes that by the time Runnegar resigned at the end of January 1995, 'it felt OK ... whereas the other way [without mediation] everyone would have been hurt and damaged'.⁴⁷

The loss of long-term workers reduced the previously deep connection between the gallery and the local contemporary art community. In December 1994 administrative assistant Lois Selby also resigned, after four years of service. This meant that, by February 1995, CCAS staff comprised Smith, who had been in Canberra for 10 months, and newly appointed gallery assistant Megan Elliot. Reflecting on the period directly preceding her appointment as assistant curator, Barney believed that the board had realised there was 'potentially a risk of disenfranchising'⁴⁸ local artists by hiring someone who was more connected to art and artists outside of Canberra. In April 1995, Barney began her new role as assistant curator.

The appointment had far-reaching consequences in positioning CCAS nationally as a dynamic contemporary institution and presenting Canberra artists to national and international audiences. It made the best of Smith, allowing him time, within a more structured workspace, to continue to move the organisation forward. Barney and Smith worked closely together over the next two years. They were a well-matched team, personally compatible and professionally complementary. Barney was and remains a supporter of Smith's achievements and of their time together, crediting the success of their professional partnership with a division of duties that allowed her to 'focus on the Canberra connections [while] he was more focused on the bigger connections'.⁴⁹

In contrast to Smith's academic path to CCAS, Barney's trajectory, both in her photographic practice and her career as a curator and director, was elliptical. She came to Canberra as a three-year-old in 1963 and, like many Canberrans, moved away from and back to the city at various times. She was awarded degrees in political science and history from The Australian National University (ANU) and then worked under a Community Development Program (CDP) trainee scheme at 2xx. This community radio station was a conduit for multi-art form practitioners, interviewing local and visiting artists and employing, in various

46 Binns, 2012.

47 Binns, 2012.

48 Jane Barney, interview with the author, 19 September 2012.

49 Barney, 2012.

capacities, numerous arts practitioners. Barney had been taking her own photographs, mostly still lifes, for some time and, through 2xx, was exposed to a variety of artists and creatives. She approached Photo Access with a request to do a Cibachrome colour course and ‘had this fantastic experience ... I hadn’t done the basic introduction to black and white. They said “don’t worry we’re doing this intensive weekend course”’.⁵⁰ This led to two years as Photo Access project officer. After this she moved to CSA where, from 1990, she was employed as an assistant at the CSA Gallery and, from 1992 to 1994, as professional practice coordinator. In 1993, while the SofA Gallery curator Julie Ewington took up an Australia Council Visual Arts Board (VAB) Writer’s Fellowship, Barney stepped in as acting curator, assuming the role in her own right in 1994. During this time, she curated, among others, two graduate exhibitions and a staff exhibition. By the time she arrived at CCAS in April 1995, she had amassed a depth of local arts knowledge, and developed an energetic curatorial vision and a commitment to expanding national and international exhibition opportunities for local artists.

Smith’s inexperience was confirmed when Barney, a week into her appointment in April 1995, asked where the exhibition program was so she could begin planning. She later recounted:

[H]e said ‘Well I haven’t really got it written down anywhere.’ He was actually running three spaces in his head. I would be getting calls from artists and they would be saying ‘I think I have a show on then’ and I would ask Trevor and he would say ‘No, so-and-so has a show on then and this one is on the following month’.⁵¹

She immediately set to work getting relevant systems into place, the first of which was a spreadsheet that timetabled upcoming exhibitions in the Main Space and the Cube at Gorman House and at the Manuka gallery.⁵² Barney then launched into exhibition planning and she recalls making a conscious curatorial decision from the beginning:

50 Barney, 2012.

51 Barney, 2012.

52 Making it even more extraordinary that Smith was keeping the exhibitions list in his head was the fact that the CCAS Manuka gallery moved to fortnightly exhibitions at the beginning of 1995. CCAS’s press release from 1 February 1995 states that this doubling of the number of exhibitions hosted annually ‘[reflects] the diversity and excitement in the Canberra arts scene [providing] even more opportunity for local artists and audiences to participate in the excitement of contemporary art’. Curiously, however, the opening exhibition at Manuka for 1995 was a show of ‘exciting works by young Melbourne artists’, graduates of the Victorian College of the Arts, titled *Displacement on a summer holiday*. Smith, as reflected in the article in ‘Art’ in *Chronicle*, 20 February 1995, was by then marketing the Manuka gallery as ‘recognised in Sydney and Melbourne as being on the cutting edge of Australian art’.

I took it into my head as a bit of my mantra [to] actively embrace messy stuff when it came along because I think you can't be in a contemporary art space and be hanging things on the wall all the time – you've got to have some mess.⁵³

Among Barney's many achievements at CCAS was her implementation, with Smith's support, of a national touring program and her forays into international touring, and international/local artist exchange. She was deeply committed to the Canberra community and to revealing local artists to local audiences and then moving the works of Canberra artists out into the wider national and international arts communities. It was Barney who provided the impetus and energy for the international tours that marked the organisation's growing confidence and maturity in contemporary art practice. By the end of her time with CCAS in 2002, the BRG collective, which began as a local response to a lack of space and exhibition opportunities for emerging artists, had completed its transformation to an internationally confident and relevant contemporary art space.

Barney staged important exhibitions of local Indigenous art, works in the intersections between new media and art, and performance art exhibitions and programs. The latter, particularly if it involved 'a bit of fun', was a strength throughout her seven years at CCAS. Of the period from 1995 onwards, she recalls that performance art 'was quite mature for a town of this age'.⁵⁴ Performance art was one strand of the multi-arts practice in the young arts community where multiple art forms were blended in backyard gatherings, garages and at early openings at Megalo, BRG and CCAS Gorman House. Barney's aim was to have 'at least some [and] sometimes whole programs of performance art where the gallery space would be taken up for four weeks with a series of performances'.⁵⁵ This was possible because of the number of performance artists living in the city, the majority of whom were students in CSA's Sculpture Department under then head of sculpture and CCAS board member David Watt. Barney's time at CSA meant she was intimately aware of the trend towards performance in the Sculpture Workshop. Her desire to open the gallery to performance art and to offer performance opportunities to the artists helped it to flourish in Canberra and at CCAS during the period from 1995 to 2002. (See Figures 24, 25 and 26)

53 Barney, 2012.

54 Barney, 2012.

55 Barney, 2012.

Figure 24. Left to right: Hawk McLean, Renald Navilly (formerly Navarro) and eX de Medici, 'Inside out', performance art season, 26 September – 24 October 1998, CCAS Gorman House

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

Figure 25. Cristy Gilbert and Anna Simic, *Edible art*, 'Inside out', performance art season, 26 September – 24 October 1998, CCAS Gorman House

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

Figure 26. Poster advertising 'Up till now ... a season of films by independent filmmaker Tony Ayres', 'Inside out', curated by Jane Barney, 25 September – 3 October 1998, CCAS Gorman House

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

Beautiful home

Beautiful home: just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing? remains a singular example of an artist-occupied gallery exhibition in Canberra.⁵⁶ This local affair inhabited the gallery over five weeks, from 11 July to 8 August 1998. Canberra artists and CSA students Bronwen Sandland and Paull McKee brought the concept of a transformed, occupied main gallery space to Barney. It would be messy, which Barney liked, and, even better, had the potential to be transgressive. Artist-driven, with an over-arching performative ethos and ripe with multiple transformative possibilities, the proposal fulfilled many of Barney's objectives and fitted closely with her personal CCAS mantra. The exhibition manifestly occupied the gallery space by importing the artists, the objects and the 1970s time period into the space in such a way that space, artists and audiences were transformed. Essentially, for five weeks, the gallery became home for a 1970s couple (see Figure 27), 'the perfect couple, liv[ing] the dream politics of domesticity under the microscope'.⁵⁷

56 For international precedents, see Chris Burden and *White light white heat*, Robert Feldman Gallery, New York, 1974; and *Doomed*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1975.

57 Naomi Horridge, 'Spending time at home', *Beautiful home*, exhibition catalogue, CCAS, 1998.

Figure 27. Bronwyn Sandland and Paull McKee, *Beautiful home: just what is it that makes today's home so different, so appealing?*, CCAS, 11 July – 8 August 1998, installation photograph

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

The original first phrase of the exhibition title was *Home beautiful*, a deliberate borrowing from the eponymous magazine that had for some time been an arbiter of domestic Australian taste and homemaking. Barney was still amused 15 years later retelling the story of the unexpected and unsuccessful negotiations that ensued between CCAS and *Home beautiful*:

One of the people on our team said, 'I know someone on the magazine and I'll write to her and see if they want to put in some sponsorship or have their editor come down and talk about the history of the magazine or have some other involvement.' Anyway, she wrote and we got a letter back from their lawyer saying, 'Desist from using our name *Home beautiful* or we will sue you.' So I thought, 'OK there's no spirit of fun there.' So we wrote back and said 'OK we won't use *Home beautiful*. Are you comfortable with us using *Beautiful home*?' and they said 'Yes that would be fine.' The invitations had been sent [under the name *Home beautiful*] and there was a bit of pre-publicity in *Art almanac*. I had to name all the places where the name *Home beautiful* would appear and make a disclaimer in the back of the catalogue.⁵⁸

58 Barney, 2012. The catalogue for *Beautiful home* bears the following disclaimer: 'Re: *Beautiful home* – the exhibition formerly known as *Home beautiful*. The exhibition *Beautiful home*, formerly known as *Home beautiful*, has no connection with the magazine 'Australian Home Beautiful' published by Pacific Publications Pty. Ltd. Canberra Contemporary Art Space apologises unreservedly to Pacific Publications Pty. Ltd. for the use of the name 'Home Beautiful'.'

The exhibition's tag line, 'just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?', is taken from the title of Richard Hamilton's 1956 iconic pop art mixed-media collage, created for the group exhibition *This is tomorrow* at London's Whitechapel Art Gallery. A staple study image for art school students, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*, was remade by Hamilton in 1992 as *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different?* for the BBC series *QED*. This second incarnation, which Hamilton created on new media software, reworked original elements to reflect changes between 1956 and 1992, both in the international political arena and within the domestic realm. Sandland could not recall whether she and McKee were aware of this second incarnation, but it is possible that it was referred to during art theory lessons.⁵⁹ In any case, it seems clear that in *Beautiful home*, the tagline operated to signify that the exhibition occupied a time frame outside of the contemporary, that the installation constituted domesticity as art and that its intended import was rather more humorous than serious.

Sandland and McKee were little more than acquaintances when they conceived the idea for an exhibition that required them to act as husband and wife for the duration. In presenting the idea to Barney they indicated that they wanted to begin as if at the start of the marriage, enjoy the loveliness of that early relationship, and then proceed through turmoil to the eventual dissolution of the relationship. Barney remembers that she warned them:

Be careful. You'll be in a public space performing this and you don't want to get to the breakup too early because we don't want a whole month of you in the gallery fighting. And neither do you.⁶⁰

Initially the artists planned to leave the gallery and go to their respective homes on Mondays and Tuesdays when the gallery was closed to the public. On the first of these Mondays both left the gallery but before the end of the day 'they came rushing back and said, "Actually, we've decided not to go home because it's too hard to extract. We want to just stay here and live here".'⁶¹ Their self-imposed exile from their everyday lives constituted a gallery-based immersion that has remained unparalleled

59 Bronwyn Sandland, conversation with the author, 16 February 2013.

60 Barney, 2012.

61 Barney, 2012.

in Canberra.⁶² The artists filled their co-opted space with furniture and objects that referenced home decor of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. These were not beautiful objects but rather mismatched signifiers of an ‘everyperson’s’ home, chosen for their power to elicit layers of memories. McKee, sporting mutton-chop sideburns, shoulder length hair and a beard, had a wardrobe of vintage outfits, and Sandland chose her many outfit changes from a rack of vintage op-shop clothes. Curiously, as Naomi Horridge writes in the catalogue essay that followed the exhibition: ‘In the melange of styles time slipped and it became apparent that neither artists nor audience were sure what actually happened in which decade’.⁶³ Nor did they appear to mind.

For *Beautiful home*, the gallery was set up as a notional house, albeit one without physical walls. Spaces quickly assumed gendered identities; McKee commandeered his ‘den’, Sandland personalised the ‘bedroom’. The exhibition also became, as Barney remembers ‘very much about their relationship’, and an example of the power of space to transform those who inhabit it versus those who visit it, in unexpected ways:

It was a very brave thing to do and it did at times become almost them versus the intruders, the visitors; there were moments when it would become stressful for them and then they remembered that they wanted people to come and visit.⁶⁴

The enormous public response to *Beautiful home* surprised artists and gallery staff. A much larger than expected number of visitors attended the exhibition and took part in various events. Of the opening day McKee wrote:

[W]e had three hundred people. We were overawed. We put Skippy on the tele, wrapped a rug around us and said ‘Hey’. Everyone sat down in the lounge. A German woman said, ‘this is the first bit of Australia I saw’ ... At the housewarming [that night] two hundred people partied, it was a hoot. We had a guy playing the Hammond

62 In 1978, the artist Micky Allen staged *Photography, drawing and poetry: a live-in show* at Ewing and George Paton galleries, University of Melbourne. In 2008, she remembered the experience: ‘The live-in show was my first solo exhibition. In it I wanted to change the experience of the gallery goer from one of white walls, hush, hush, don’t speak, say what you really think when you get out of here – to one of sit down, relax, absorb the work at varying rates, discussing as you go, integrating the experience of being in a gallery with other life activities’ (*Photography, drawing and poetry: a live-in show*, 1978’, *Mickey Allen*, www.mickyallan.com/Bodies/Live-inShow.html, accessed 10 July 2016).

63 Horridge, 1998.

64 Barney, 2012.

Organ and a cover band playing Burt Bacharach. A dapper silver moustachioed man in his sixties came in, to tell the staff that his wife had asked for something really unusual to do on Friday night. They came for the pyjama party ... in red dressing gowns and pyjamas.⁶⁵

Beautiful home's extensive public program encompassed the opening night housewarming, a pyjama party, a fondue evening hosted by the artists, video nights and a bridge afternoon. Of the latter, Barney recalls:

[I] got my old mum who played bridge to come and do a bridge day and we got the *Canberra Times* bridge writer to come down and he did a real analysis of one of the hands in his bridge column. [*Beautiful home*] went to all of these illogical extremes.⁶⁶

There were unexpected audience interactions. While nostalgia was deliberately privileged in the exhibition plan, objects familiar to viewers from their youth or childhood elicited life stories that were at times exhaustingly personal for the artists to hear; neither artist was expecting the level of intimacy that evolved between themselves and audiences. Following the exhibition Sandland wrote, 'We didn't prepare ourselves for how much energy it takes to listen to everyone'.⁶⁷ Barney, who was a keen observer and a willing participant in the unfolding process, retains clear memories:

The punters would come in on the weekend and they'd be rifling through ... as Bronwyn said '... our undies'. Things were left open and a bit spilly and a bit messy. Bronwyn was a big knitter and she would create giant pompoms, often in colours to match her clothes.⁶⁸

The immersive nature of the exhibition affected the relationship between artists and gallery staff as much as between artists and audiences. In reminiscing about the exhibition, which she remembers as 'an amazing

65 Paull McKee, in Horridge, 1998.

66 Barney, 2012.

67 Bronwyn Sandland, in Horridge, 1998, p 7.

68 Barney, 2012. Sandland has continued to knit. Her large knitted interventions into the Canberra landscape have included covering 'a two-storey modernist maisonette'. See Merryn Gates, 'Bronwen Sandland: *Housecosy*', *Artlink*, 23, 1, March 2003, www.artlink.com.au/articles/2438/bronwen-sandland-housecosy/, accessed 3 August 2016.

experience', and which required gallery staff to negotiate their working space differently, Barney reflected more widely on this concept of navigated, negotiated space:

As people working there you had to navigate your way around. Our office at that time was right next to their home. You were conscious that you couldn't just walk through the gallery to the storeroom, for example, as there were people living there. So the gallery became our negotiated space [in this exhibition and others]. We used to comment sometimes that you would quite enjoy the reclamation that used to go on for four days between exhibitions. It was our space in that time; it was as though you would wipe the space clean and start again.⁶⁹

Some gallery staff had more difficulty than others negotiating this separation between exhibition and working spaces. While Sandland didn't have a 'day job' and was therefore in the exhibition space full-time, McKee, as did most 'husbands' during the period represented in exhibition, went out to work every day. Barney was made aware after the exhibition came down that:

one of the staff working with me, who was this little skinny person that was always hungry, would suddenly materialise in the gallery every time they would organise lunch or dinner. 'Oh we were feeding three people,' Bronwyn said. 'You know, it was our home and we were getting a little bit sick of it because she would turn up for lunch every day.'⁷⁰

The variables inherent in the exhibition concept and design for *Beautiful home* included this always-present, transgressive potential between artists and staff associated with negotiating the transformed gallery space. Additionally, they included the unpredictable nature of artist/audience interaction. With the latter, any perceived control that the artists may have thought they had rapidly slipped away. The combinations of objects, artists/performers and an audience for whom the usual boundaries were removed created a volatile, liminal environment. While other artists were making performative interventions into historic homes in this period, the particular 24-hour-a-day immersion practised by Sandland and McKee was unique in Canberra. The Western gallery construct is essentially designed to house static exhibitions with which viewers do not

69 Barney, 2012.

70 Barney, 2012.

interact. In any single exhibition period, each viewer, although his or her individual responses will vary, can generally expect to encounter the same exhibition. Performance art at CCAS, and in particular in *Beautiful home*, became a product of many interactions that were unknown before they occurred. The usual boundaries were absent, the number of visitors was high and the results were, therefore, unpredictable.

Exhibiting minorities and touring exhibitions at BRG/CCAS: a comparison

The presentations of minorities in exhibition at BRG/CCAS were largely successful and often groundbreaking incursions that provided a foil to the growing number of official cultural spaces and institutional exhibitions that marked Canberra as a national capital space. BRG and CCAS were contiguous iterations of the same physical and conceptual space, although their governance and funding parameters were different. Both iterations showed a commitment to exhibiting the works of artists who were members of minority groups or who worked in mediums that fell well outside established parameters. During BRG's existence, when the local community was vigorously agitating for recognition within the national capital space, 'minority exhibitions' served to clearly differentiate between local emerging art and the institutional/commercial national capital space reality. Minority exhibitions at CCAS gradually moved away from this focus on creating a clearly differentiated local community to display a growing maturity and confidence within national and, from the mid-1990s, international markets.

BRG was in essence anti-establishment, acting in opposition to both the institutional and the commercial gallery models in the city from foundation in 1981 through to merger in 1987. Both the first and second exhibitions at BRG, *Bill posters appreciated* and *Dreamtime machinetime*, heralded profound changes in the reception of contemporary poster making and urban Indigenous art respectively. Toward the end of the 1980s, escalating changes saw both art forms move from the margins into the mainstream.

The position of the poster in Australian art history in the 1980s made visible the end of modernism and the rise of popular culture. Posters and prints in *Bill posters appreciated* were sourced from local, national

and international printmakers and cooperatives making works at the margins of art practice, championing causes whose protagonists came from minority social groups. Roger Butler recalls this period as a time when the National Gallery was 'putting in place strategies for acquisitions on a number of fronts Australia wide'.⁷¹ These included the acquisition for the national collection of more than 30 posters in the period from 1981 to 1983, from members of Megalo who were exhibiting at BRG and the artists from Australian and international collectives who were represented in *Bill posters appreciated*. Butler's reaction to the exhibition caused him to think of:

the whole movement and all those that were producing posters in the ACT and elsewhere. Colin Little was a focus; the example of Earthworks and then his work at Megalo highlighted the diverse strength of the movement.⁷²

Little died in October 1982 at the age of 30, a decade after he had established the Earthworks Poster Collective (1972–79, Tin Sheds, Sydney). Butler contextualised Little's oeuvre within a short history of poster making, in his essay for the *Colin Little retrospective* exhibition at BRG (10–23 August 1983). The exhibition underlined the primary link between the genesis of BRG and its roots as an outlet for the poster-making culture that Megalo demonstrated in Canberra. Throwing light on the wider national context, Butler concluded that, 'A fitting response to [Little's] career is that the poster, traditionally regarded by Australian art museums as ephemeral and unimportant, has had to be reassessed'.⁷³ BRG continued to engage with printmaking throughout the period leading to amalgamation in 1987.

BRG's engagement with Indigenous Australia was uneven during the period to amalgamation. It was not until 1995, when Smith conceived the exhibition *Naii Ngarrambai Wanggirali Burrangiri Nangi Dyannai Ngurui* (*the lay of the land is how you know your country; when you look behind you, you can always see your tracks*), which was subsequently developed by Elliot, that Indigenous exhibitions were scheduled on the annual CCAS calendar.

71 Roger Butler, email to the author, 3 August 2011.

72 Butler, 2011.

73 Roger Butler, 'Colin Little: poster maker', *Colin Little retrospective*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra, BRG, 1983, pp 3–4.

Trevor Nickolls' *Dreamtime machinetime* was the first of the Indigenous exhibitions at BRG. Nickolls was already in a minority as an Indigenous Australian and, as a manifestation of urban Indigenous art in 1981, *Dreamtime machinetime* positioned him further as a minority of one. Nickolls, who in 1976 was a prize winner in Canberra's Civic Permanent Art Award (established 1971), first exhibited works in Canberra with the Arts Council of Australia (ACT) in May 1977 at its CTC Gallery location. This brief showing at CTC Gallery, from 11 am to 10 pm over four days, passed largely unnoticed, although WL Hoffman mentioned it in his May 26 'The world of music' column in the *Canberra Times*, writing that the exhibition showed 'how people of a different culture and a different frame of reference see modern society'.⁷⁴ Nickolls himself, who in that year was studying at the Canberra College of Advanced Education (CCAEE),⁷⁵ hoped the works would 'show people how to appreciate the search by black people for identity and dignity in our modern technological society'.⁷⁶ Nickolls' return to Canberra in 1981 to take up the HC Coombs Creative Arts Fellowship at the ANU led to a meeting on campus with Little that resulted in the decision to stage *Dreamtime machinetime* at BRG.

Nickolls' exhibition was seminally important. Much more than just another step in the paradigmatic shift of Indigenous art from ethnographic display in museums to fine art exhibition in institutional and commercial galleries, it constituted the first cohesive manifestation of urban Indigenous art in exhibition in Australia. The following discussion outlines the trajectory of Indigenous art in exhibition in Australia preceding *Dreamtime machinetime* and looks briefly at the reception and flowering of Urban Indigenous art post-*Dreamtime machinetime* to further illuminate this shifting paradigm.

74 WL Hoffman, 'The world of music', *Canberra Times*, 26 May 1977, p 25.

75 CCAEE (which became the University of Canberra in 1990) was established in 1967. Prime Minister John Gorton's speech at the unveiling of its foundation stone in October 1968 reminds us how geographically small Canberra was: 'One more thing, Sir, I would say. This college is being built in open country, but within measurable time, within a short time, there will be around it the new town of Belconnen' ('Speech at unveiling of foundation stone, Canberra College of Advanced Education', 28 October 1968, pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00001945.pdf, accessed 3 September 2012).

76 Hoffman, 1977.

In 1959, Tony Tuckson, at the time the deputy director of AGNSW, made the pioneering taxonomic leap to exhibit Indigenous art in a gallery context for the first time. The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) was the only Australian institution in the 1970s to purchase contemporary Aboriginal art for its permanent collection. The NGV opened its gallery of Oceanic art 'whose prime purpose [was] the exhibition of Aboriginal art' in 1984.⁷⁷ In the 1980s, the NGA and the Art Gallery of Western Australia included the acquisition of Indigenous art in their collection policies, but it was not until the 1990s that Australia's other state galleries began to purchase contemporary Indigenous art. Commercial galleries also began to curate exhibitions of Western Desert and Arnhem Land art during the 1980s. A handful of government-funded exhibitions toured internationally towards the end of the 1980s, reflecting the federal government's interest in promoting the iconography of North Australian Aboriginal art as the international cultural face of Australia's bicentennial celebrations. The highest profile was *Dreamings: the art of Aboriginal Australia*, organised by the Asia Society with professional input from the collections and anthropology staff of the South Australian Museum.⁷⁸ In its contemporary form and reclassified as fine art, the exhibition of an efflorescence of Indigenous art practice – including, since the 1990s, urban Indigenous art – has become increasingly intense.

Nickolls' relationship with BRG forged an early link between BRG and the NGA. Three years after *Dreamtime machinetime*, *Koori art '84* introduced Sydney audiences to contemporary urban Indigenous artists. Curator Wally Caruana characterised the exhibition, which was held at Artspace in Sydney, as 'a watershed ... for urban Aboriginal art and artists'.⁷⁹ AGNSW's purchase from this exhibition of Jeffrey Samuels' *This changing continent of Australia* has previously been recognised as the first acquisition of urban Indigenous art by a national or state gallery.⁸⁰ The National Gallery, however, acquired Nickolls' eponymous painting *Dreamtime machinetime* in 1982 as a result of seeing it in exhibition at BRG in 1981, thus making it the first institution to purchase an urban Indigenous work.

77 'Aboriginal art and the National Gallery of Victoria', *National Gallery of Victoria: annual report 1984–85*.

78 *Dreamings: the art of Aboriginal Australia* opened in New York in October 1988, then toured to Chicago, Melbourne and, finally, in 1990, to the South Australian Museum.

79 Wally Caruana, *Aboriginal art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2003, p 201.

80 Caruana, 2003.

Many of the 30 Indigenous artists involved in *Koori art '84* worked in isolation. With the aim of increasing exhibition, curatorship and professional development opportunities, a number of these artists founded Boomalli Artist's Co-operative in 1987. 'Boomalli' means 'to strike or make a mark' and, from the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s, Boomalli acted to significantly increase the profile of a number of city-based Indigenous artists. By the early 1990s, Bronwyn Bancroft, Brenda L Croft, Fiona Foley, Djon Mundine, Hetti Perkins and Daphne Wallace had emerged as the first generation of Indigenous individuals working in the combined roles of artists-curators in Australia.

Nickolls' seminal importance to urban Indigenous art cannot be overstated. On hearing of his death in October 2012, Vernon Ah Kee, a founding member of proppaNow, Brisbane's urban Indigenous artists' collective wrote:

In 2012 we are still grappling with identity and art. It is a healthy dialogue I think. And Nickolls is as much a part of that discourse as he ever was. I think back to when I first moved to Brisbane in the early 1990s and people began talking more and more about this thing called 'Urban' Aboriginal art. Trevor Nickolls was before all that.⁸¹

The exhibition of non-Indigenous Judo (now Juno) Gemes' photographic portraits of Indigenous Australians, *We wait no more: a selection of photographs and textures*, was also held in BRG's first year and illustrates the gallery's engagement with Indigenous Australia. Photography was familiar to gallery visitors and presented a generally more accessible view of Aboriginal people than had Nickolls' *Dreamtime machinetime* thesis. Responses in the visitors' book included: 'Impressed with stillness and respect for the people. Can feel the hope and strength'; 'Very impressed with poetry, stillness & feeling in images'. The colonial concept of the noble savage, however, was also alive and well. This was evidenced by the response 'Thanks for the faces – noble. I was impressed by how well the people looked', and a comment that, in its admittance of 'a lack of knowledge', echoed the wider non-Indigenous understanding of 1980s Aboriginal Australia:

81 Vernon Ah Kee, 'Trevor Nickolls 1949–2012', 30 October 2012, vernonahkee.blogspot.com/2012/10/trevor-nickolls-1949-2012.html, accessed 15 August 2016.

Impressed by openness honesty of the faces. Felt in harmony with their strong identification with the land. Felt backward about my lack of knowledge about Aboriginal achievement. Renewed my belief in equality, identity and people. Tremendous eye-opener. I hope this exhibition travels across the country.⁸²

It was 13 years before BRG's successor, CCAS, hosted another exhibition of Indigenous art in what was, by then, a very different national environment, both politically and for contemporary art. Contemporary Indigenous art in the 1990s, including urban art, had gained national and international currency.

Two other exhibitions during BRG's first year, *Our place* and *The Foundry – on the road*, continued the collective's sociopolitical engagement, giving visibility to disenfranchised Canberrans.

The Foundry, like Jobless Action, was a Community Youth Support Scheme (CYSS)–funded employment-creation enterprise managed by one part-time and two full-time co-coordinators, whose programs were designed to equip unemployed young people with new skills. Charles Livingstone, chair of The Foundry Association (which managed The Foundry) described the organisation's house in Braddon, which attracted around 50 people a day, as 'an important clearing house for people's problems – a place where there is always someone to talk to'.⁸³ Funding enabled The Foundry to provide opportunities for clients to work with craftspeople at Ainslie Village. Previously, artworks made by Foundry clients would not have progressed to exhibition; BRG's open-access policies, however, were expressly designed to accommodate such a group. While the works displayed by the 18 artists did not act as 'a personal expression of frustration or a political bludgeon',⁸⁴ the exhibition politicised the proposed cuts to CYSS programs that would directly affect The Foundry. Importantly, through coverage on ABC TV's *Nationwide* program, BRG was contextualised nationally, for the first time, as socially relevant.

82 BRG visitors' book, 1981–83.

83 Charles Livingstone, quoted in Sonja Kaleski, 'Art "on the road"', *Canberra Times*, 27 September 1981, p 10.

84 Kaleski, 1981.

Figure 28. Poster, *The Foundry*, printed at Megalo, artists unknown

Source. Photographer: Dean Butters. Megalo poster archives, reproduced with permission

The second exhibition, *Our place*, initiated by Julia Church, showed work by children with disabilities from Chapman Hostel, and included wall hangings, pastel drawings, paintings, T-shirts and bags. In 1976, the UN General Assembly declared 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons. *Our place* constituted Church and BRG's response to this international initiative and provided a locus for Church's community-focused practice. The Chapman Hostel children went on to stage performances with the money raised from artwork sales. The exhibition was linked to the idea, strong in the 1960s, that art was a useful tool for social change and it provided an example of art practice with the intent to improve the quality of life for minorities at the margins of Canberra society.⁸⁵ Church recalls that she and Mark Denton were then among a handful of artists working in the community in this way:

When I was still at art school Mark and I used to go out to various care centres and work with people and do occupational art – in some way helping people to deal with the frustration of being institutionalised. I used to work with intellectually disabled

⁸⁵ Community practice is still in evidence at Megalo today, and remains a central tenet of the community art centres that were established in Canberra's Belconnen and Tuggeranong town centres in the 1990s.

kids; they were really frustrated with their situation, they were in a hostel and a lot of them were quite capable of living in the community [and] wanted their independence. I'd taken them to Bitumen River before so we decided to make an exhibition together. I taught them how to screenprint ... that was a lot of fun and [later] we did performance stuff as well, but not at BRG.⁸⁶

Reviewing for the *Canberra Times*, Grishin noted that 'it was yet another important undertaking by the Bitumen River Gallery'. That Church was well suited to supporting community art projects is made obvious by Grishin, whose descriptions of the works foregrounded their 'vigour ... stunning boldness and a strong expressive use of colour' and 'immediate unimpeded vision':

Our Place is not an exhibition that you need to approach with charitable intention; as an exhibition of art it is a bold, brilliant and rewarding experience. There is a richness and vitality in the range of the imagination in the work on display ... What emerges from this exhibition is a range of strong artistic personalities with real emotive, expressive and imaginary powers that speak of an unusual sense of creativity.⁸⁷

Tony Ayres

Tony Ayres and de Medici joined the BRG collective in 1983. Both were destined for international careers and they made significant contributions to the collective's continuing commitment to exhibit work from members of minority groups and artists working in non-traditional mediums.

Ayres came to Australia from Macau with his mother and sister in 1964, towards the end of the White Australia policy and before the first wave of Asian immigration that brought Vietnamese students and the first 'boat people' to Australia. 'We were,' remembers Ayres, 'pretty much in white Australia.'⁸⁸ After two years at ANU, in 1983 he transferred to CSA where he majored in photography but found himself drawn to printmaking. Ayres was among the student artists particularly supported by Mandy Martin. He began working with the members of BRG in 1983, and in that year 'co-opted' de Medici – who had returned to Canberra to take

86 Church, 2012.

87 Sasha Grishin, 'Bold and brilliant and rewarding', *Canberra Times*, 20 November 1981, p 10.

88 'Tony Ayres' new film echoes stories from his own life', *ABC Conversations with Richard Fidler*, 10 August 2007, www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2007/08/10/2001814.htm, accessed 15 August 2016.

up painting at CSA – to the collective.⁸⁹ Ayres was a polymath whose developing interests, after art school, included filmmaking. De Medici remembers him as ‘a good member ... a brilliant guy [with] an amazing work ethic’.⁹⁰

Ayres’ presence as an openly gay, Asian man opened up an aesthetic not otherwise easily accessed by collective members or the wider Canberra public. A number of his prints referenced issues faced by gay men in Australia in the first half of the 1980s and were purchased from the artist for the NGA collection in 1993.⁹¹ They included *Vogue man* (1982), *Skeleton* (1982), *I am the Nazi I am the Jew* (1984), *Glamour men and S-P* (1984) and *Behind the wall* (c 1984).⁹²

In 1984, Ayres brought Chilean-born artist Juan Davila to Canberra. A proponent of art in service to social and political change, Davila was 28 when he immigrated to Melbourne in 1976. Ayres had met and spoken ‘briefly’ to Davila during Artist Week in Adelaide in March 1984, having attended with Virgo, then in her first year as BRG co-coordinator. He wrote to Davila on 1 April about the possibility of Davila speaking during the *Art forum* program at CSA, ‘through the auspices of Bitumen River’. Asking for ‘some kind of continuation of your artist week talk’, Ayres requested ‘a subject such as the direction that socially progressive artists should/could be taking, the limitations of the current state of painting in terms of the politically radical etc’. Davila was paid a fee of \$60 plus accommodation, meals ‘or anything like that’.⁹³

Ayres continued to explore gay themes in an exhibition of manipulated screenprints titled *The image of desire*, which was shown at BRG from 10–28 April 1985. These works had, in the main, been produced during the artist’s final year at CSA in 1984, and included the prints purchased by NGA in 1993. CCAS gifted the screenprinted poster advertising the exhibition to the NGA in 1993. Darkly homoerotic and intimating violence, the exhibition provided previously unseen content for audiences, many of whom appreciated the essay that made them feel ‘ok about

89 De Medici, 2012.

90 De Medici, 2012.

91 See list of Ayres’ posters held by the NGA, www.printsandprintmaking.gov.au/artists/10662/works/, accessed 29 August 2016.

92 Ayres’ poster advertising the 1984 BRG exhibition *A new spirit in china painting* – to which Grishin acerbically responded in the visitor’s book ‘Where’s the new spirit?’ – was gifted to the NGA by CCAS in 1993.

93 Tony Ayres, letter to Juan Davila, 1 April 1984, CCAS archives.

not understanding the visual leads!’ Included among these was Roland Manderson who wrote, ‘Thanks very much for the essay. I’m sick of art speaking for itself ... I am thankful for the view of the person responsible for making it’.⁹⁴ Ayres’ catalogue introduction provides a superb example of how important and effective written mediation from the artist can be for viewers; the essay was perfectly attuned to an audience unfamiliar with the intense visual language of gay culture, the words gently leading viewers to a contextual understanding:

Initially the prints operate to a highly specific sense of audience. They are meant to be viewed by gay men. The images, words and situations they describe are drawn from contemporary urban homosexual terminology – s/m, gloryholes, pornography. The content acts as a critique of the way in which desire is represented within this context. Understanding of this critique is most available to gay men who are familiar with the imagery.⁹⁵

Grishin believed that the images provided ‘a brilliant and provocative critique of the modern western society’s homosexual subculture’. He wrote that the work was ‘sophisticated ... technically and in its thinking ... going considerably beyond making a simple social statement or seeking to be attractive aesthetic objects’. Grishin also noted that BRG was about to mark its fourth year in operation, ‘continuing to provide an outlet for important art otherwise not seen in Canberra’.⁹⁶

eX de Medici and CCAS: minorities and touring exhibitions

eX de Medici, who grew up in Canberra in a politically active family, explored minority forms of art practice and championed disenfranchised minorities from the beginning of her career. She attended art schools at Riverina CAE and Darling Downs Institute and completed her undergraduate degree in visual arts at CSA in the mid-1980s, majoring in painting and photo media. She also studied multi-track recording and sound sampling at Canberra School of Music.

94 BRG visitors’ book, 1985, CCAS archives.

95 Tony Ayres, ‘Introduction’, *The image of desire*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra, BRG, 1985.

96 Sasha Grishin, ‘*Images of desire*’, *Canberra Times*, 23 April 1985, p 28.

Her early works included a two-hour performance on the Cahill Expressway – ‘a really good place to place flesh ... it is completely artificial’⁹⁷ – in which she crossed the road 27 times, making a chalk line as she reached each verge, before she was removed by officers of the Department of Main Roads; and a performance at the Canberra rubbish tip where she hung her unsuccessful works among the city’s messy detritus. She described this latter performance to reviewer Virginia Cook as being ‘about success ... how to have a successful exhibition at the dump is really quite difficult’.⁹⁸ During the BRG exhibition titled *Work saints*, de Medici created a large charcoal drawing each day, working for five consecutive days from 9 am to 5 pm, reflecting Canberra’s bureaucratic working hours. The message behind the performance and exhibition was the concept of the artist as a worker like any other:

[O]ne of the reasons I am doing ‘Work saints’ is that artists are not seen as workers ... [T]hree per cent is magic, ninety-seven per cent is work ... [Y]ou get dirty, you get tired, you want to have a break.⁹⁹

The touring BRG members’ show *Nowhere utopia* (3–14 March 1987) spanned the crossover period that took BRG through to CCAS. The exhibition of photocopy works evidenced minority arts practices, as well as commenting, through its title, on the dissolution of the utopian ideals of the collective/artist-run space. Ironically, it provided an example of how a medium that was first shown in a collective, then rejected as ‘not art’ by an established art space, could be subsequently invited, three years later, into the space that had previously rejected it. De Medici recalls that:

Andy [Hurrell], Elena [Gallegos] and I approached the ACP for a show of [these photocopied works] and we got back a letter (and they were the cutting edge of photography in Australia at that time) and they wrote back and said, ‘We’re sorry, this isn’t photography, goodbye’. And then about three years later we were invited to show and we told them to fuck off. Because by then we’d finished with it and they were just finding it.¹⁰⁰

97 Virginia Cook, “Artist shown as worker”, *Canberra Times*, 20 February 1986, p 5.

98 Cook, 1986.

99 Cook, 1986.

100 De Medici, 2012.

Figure 29. *Nowhere utopia*. BRG touring group exhibition at THAT Space, Brisbane, 3–14 March 1987, installation photograph. Far right: eX de Medici's *Pistol*, 1985, gridded black-and-white laser-copied image, 1200 x 1600 cm, printed on Canon's first prototype laser photocopier as a 16-piece gridded image

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

In this way, the medium of photocopy traversed a path from marginality to mainstream acceptance. This path to acceptance was likewise enacted in: print/poster making, on which Megalo and BRG were founded; urban Indigenous art, with Nickolls' *Dreamtime machinetime*; and exhibitions by people with disabilities, as in *Our place*. A difference with the photocopy medium in *Nowhere utopia* is that its use was a knowing exercise; for the artists, the worthlessness of the materials provided their political *raison d'être*; an opportunity to say something worthwhile through a medium rejected by the established art world.

Nowhere utopia included the first of de Medici's geo-political gun imagery.¹⁰¹ *Pistol* (1985, gridded black-and-white laser-copied image, 1200 x 1600 cm), 'a revolver from a very old dictionary',¹⁰² was printed on Canon's first prototype laser photocopier as a 16-piece gridded image (see Figure 29). This and two other works were the early results of the artist's residencies around Australia, working with Canon multifunction

101 *Pistol* and *knife* were exhibited 25 years later in the CCAS Canberra centenary show *Bad girls* (8 February – 16 March 2013), curated by the author.

102 De Medici, 2012.

laser printers/photocopiers that allowed her to increase the size of images until they were 'building size ... whacked up with wallpaper paste'.¹⁰³ De Medici remembered that 'It was very tedious because you'd have to get them all cut properly and the machine didn't quite grid them all up correctly'.¹⁰⁴ At the time, clean finishes were secondary to the primary aim of the work; de Medici recalls that 'It wasn't a big issue about making perfect things because no-one was going to buy them; you were just going to throw them away anyway'.¹⁰⁵ Images were sourced from 'everywhere'.¹⁰⁶ The second work in the series, *knife* (1985, gridded black-and-white laser-copied image, 15 panels, 2000 x 1500 cm), blown out and mysterious, was from 'a very strange small photograph of my deceased grandmother's wedding cake with a hand with a big knife coming into the picture'. The third work, damaged in transit on return from Brisbane, was a colour photocopy of a scene from *South Pacific* privileging the homoerotic in the poses of the male protagonists.¹⁰⁷

De Medici has been 'fascinated with signifiers of power for as long as [she] can remember. It's the one thing that just never goes away; [power] and the paradoxes within [its signifiers]'.¹⁰⁸ This fascination with power and its effect on the powerless drove de Medici's attempts to subvert what she regarded as Virgo's increasingly mainstream curatorial aesthetic. De Medici advocated for the continuance of BRG as an artist-run collective space, believing that the mandate of such a space should be the support and guidance of emerging artists. She voted against the handover of the BRG constitution that allowed the formation of CCAS and, throughout the period of Virgo's directorship of CCAS, took every opportunity to subvert what she saw as creeping institutionalisation.

Over the five years following the handover of BRG's constitution to CCAS (1987–92), de Medici and Runnegar sought to inject alternative notes of performance and messiness back into the exhibition calendar – tropes that

103 De Medici worked again with Canon in producing her billboard for *I am you: artists against violence, artists for tolerance*, the Goethe Institut travelling exhibition at CCAS in 1994.

104 De Medici, 2012.

105 By 2012, when I sat with de Medici choosing works for *Bad girls, Pistol* and *knife* had attained an iconic status and I was excited but nervous about putting these fragile pieces on the wall in case they were damaged. eX remarked 'If they get damaged don't worry. Do remember it's just a miracle that these have survived. They're photocopies. It's raw and base and it's not a problem for me if they get damaged' (eX de Medici, interview with the author, 1 February 2013).

106 De Medici, 2013.

107 The blacks retain their crisp outlines even today, belying the passage of years.

108 De Medici, 2012.

had defined the early days of BRG. De Medici believed then, as she does today, that 'a contemporary arts space should be a place where emerging artists should be given the correct respect ... and assistance'.¹⁰⁹ As time went on, the relationship between Virgo and de Medici soured:

Issues arose between me and Anne and older members who slipped away ... [G]radually through Anne's [time] it became much more conservative, although at the same time we would do things, Brenda and I; Anne would go [out of Canberra] and Brenda and I would be scrabbling through the proposals and [would then] notify people and say 'you've got a show' without [Anne's] permission – subversive incursions while she was away.¹¹⁰

De Medici's early explorations into art forms that the establishment considered worthless, such as performance and photocopy, reached the apex of alternative, minority art practice with tattooing. In 1989, an Australia Council grant afforded her the opportunity to spend a year studying the medium in California. Tattooing provided a medium in which her primary interests coalesced: minorities; minority practice; power and its signifiers; and gay culture, which was flourishing in the tattoo world between the 1950s and the 1980s. Importantly, it also fundamentally changed her manner of working and set her up for the later execution of the powerful, intricate, large-scale works on paper that would make her international reputation:

I'm very ordered when I work. Tattooing made me that way because you're dealing with blood and diseases – I started tattooing at the height of HIV/AIDS so everything had to become absolutely ordered. I believe tattooing absolutely changed every aspect of how I worked.¹¹¹

By the beginning of 1994, de Medici had fully incorporated tattooing into her art practice. During the next 18 months, exhibitions at CCAS and Australian Girls Own Gallery (aGOG) – respectively titled *Inside out: out of the mainstream: a group exhibition* and *Scratching* – illustrated her seminal engagement with this minority form and cemented her position as the only contemporary artist in Australia working with this medium as an alternative contemporary art practice.

109 De Medici, 2012.

110 De Medici, 2012.

111 De Medici, 2012.

These two concurrent exhibitions highlighted the *process* of tattooing. Runnegar and de Medici curated *Inside out*, which ran from 3–26 June 1994, immediately preceding Smith's *Romantisystem*. This marked the last of their many ventures together for BRG/CCAS. In title and in content, the exhibition privileged those on the fringe. Included were the detritus of de Medici's tattooing practice in the form of 100 bloody napkins. De Medici is explicitly not named as an artist in the exhibition; her choice was to acknowledge the contribution of the blood patches as artworks provided by the 100 tattooed people from whom they came. Deborah Clark, reviewing de Medici's concurrent solo exhibition *Scratching* at aGOG, brought the focus back to the artist, writing of de Medici's work in *Inside out* that:

[The napkins] were displayed in plastic bags, like a body of specimens, and their nauseating quality was somehow cumulative. The work was called *The blood of others* and its reference to scientific samples was underscored by the idea of guilt and bad conscience, making mileage out of the blood of others. Implicit here is the complicity of the artist, like the imperialist, exploiting and souveniring the bodies of her subjects.¹¹²

Inside out also included a number of air-brushed motorcycle bike tanks that, as with de Medici's bloody napkins, were unattributed. Ruth Ellis, in the brief catalogue essay, writes that 'The act of customising the motorcycle to an internal and personal agenda flows clearly to the act of tattooing and customising the flesh machine through pigment and blood'.¹¹³ Other works in *Inside out* were: a tipi erected in the gallery from the nomadic and mutable outsider collective Electric Tipi; a selection of woodworks from NSW prison inmate and former Canberran Bob Cummins; embroidered skulls from Vicki Bell; and an installation from two ex-Brickworks artists and Canberra performance group Splinters members Stuart Vaskess and Adam Herbst. The installation's notes instructed the:

guest [to] enter through The Bower, make obeisance at the Dragon Flower Shrine, cook the sacred sausage on the Barbecue of Desire (dedicated to an armless yet devastating deity, devoted to the cooking of meat) light the sacred candles (3) and eat the sandwich provided by the fruits of heaven.¹¹⁴

112 Deborah Clark, 'Scratching the surface', *Art Monthly Australia*, July 1994, p 30.

113 Ruth Ellis, *Inside out – out of the main stream: a group exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra, CCAS, 1994.

114 Stuart Vaskess and Adam Herbst, in Ellis, 1994.

The next showing of de Medici's tattoo practice took place outdoors. Smith's Sydney connections facilitated the Goethe-Institut's international travelling exhibition *I am you: artists against violence, art for tolerance* from 12 October to 6 November 1994. The works, by 20 artists from Europe and the United States (including Marina Abramovic), were joined by de Medici's CCAS-commissioned work (see Figure 30) and erected on large billboards erected on the median strip in front of Gorman House. The location was one of 200 around the world exhibiting the billboards throughout 1994. *I am you* aimed to bring world attention to growing aggression in Europe against refugees and political minorities. The press release stated, 'Racism, intolerance and xenophobia are unfortunately global phenomena and their effects are also felt here in Australia'.¹¹⁵ De Medici's billboard presented a group of tattooed people, an outsider minority in the mid-1990s, in various linked poses.

Figure 30. eX de Medici, *United colours*, gridded colour laser-copied image, in Goethe-Institut's international travelling exhibition, *I am you: artists against violence, art for tolerance*, CCAS, 12 October – 6 November 1994, installation photograph

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

¹¹⁵ Media release, *I am you: artists against violence, art for tolerance*, October 1994, CCAS archives.

Staging the exhibition on Ainslie Avenue was a bold intervention into public space, years before the ACT's Labor government under Jon Stanhope enacted a public arts policy (2001–11) that made public art commonplace. The exhibition's reception was not entirely positive. Canberra was then and is now a billboard-free city; for local residents living at Reid's outer edge, the global implications of tolerance paled beside their sympathy for those who they thought were being hectored. In a letter to the *Canberra Times*, titled 'Billboard horror', (Ms) P Sanders of Reid complained:

I am writing in protest at the erection of certain hideous billboards, which have appeared recently in the centre of Ainslie Avenue. These billboards carry messages such as 'Clean your house' and 'I am you' (referring to the human brain.) One could only conclude from these that the government tenants, who are obliged to gaze on them every day of their lives, instead of enjoying the previously aesthetically beautiful Ainslie Avenue, are perhaps not quite normal and need to be given a visual moral lesson. Perhaps those who have provided this lesson in morality could arrange to put their own houses in order first.¹¹⁶

The last of de Medici's exhibitions foregrounding tattooing opened at CCAS in March 1996. In *60 heads*, the tattoo was overtly presented as contemporary art, in a whole-of-gallery exhibition that provided another example of CCAS's attention to minority groups and art forms. One result was that an entirely new demographic entered the gallery, setting a new benchmark for visitor numbers. Barney, then CCAS assistant curator, remembers the exhibition as 'a real pleasure to work on. It was a beautiful moment where the tattoo levelled the playing field'.¹¹⁷ In assessing the diversity among exhibition visitors, Barney concluded that:

eX was ahead of her time. Every tattooed person in Canberra and the surrounding region visited that show. We had truckies, bus drivers, bikers ... not our normal clientele, but our normal clientele were there too because some of our regular clientele were in the photos.¹¹⁸

116 Ms P Sanders, letter to the editor, *Canberra Times*, 21 October 1994, p 10.

117 Barney, 2012.

118 Barney, 2012.

A full-colour catalogue, supported by the ACT Cultural Council, accompanied the exhibition. It included essays by Gordon Bull, then head of the Art Theory Workshop at ANU School of Art; and Jenny McFarlane, then assistant curator at City Gallery, Canberra, who previously wrote about the artist's work, and who – along with Barney – was instrumental in bringing the concept of *60 heads* to exhibition.¹¹⁹ Encapsulated in the essays was the idea – new for Western society in the mid-1990s – that the tattoo and contemporary art are joined at an interface. Long the terrain of bikers, jail inmates and sailors – and devoid of the cultural signifiers that marked the place of the tattoo in non-Anglo societies – the tattooed in Western society were, at the end of the last century, perceived as outsiders and not as the representatives of a contemporary arts practice.

Seventy-four candid snapshots, without artifice, many taken just after the tattoo had been placed on the skin, were chosen (see Figure 31) from around 400 of the photographs in the rapidly growing photographic database that de Medici collected from 1989 to 1995 in studios in Europe, North America and Australia. Tattoos ranged from the wonky, homemade *Dad* and *Mom*, to exquisite miniatures, and complex sleeves and body suits, while the portrait subjects ranged from young boys to hard men to girls next door. Not all of the tattoos were de Medici's work. She recalled the 'groups within the groups':

Some of them were the ultra-young, 14 or so, with home tattoos. They would come into the tattoo shop and [I'd say] 'get out, you're a baby – you're not even allowed to be in here.' [But I'd ask] can I take a photograph of that and they'd go 'Yeah whatever.' Then there are [those people] directly after the tattoo process, they're dishevelled, they're bursting with endorphins, they're kind of not there – I find they're post-coital or something – you know, post-pain. Maybe 10 per cent of the *60 heads* photographs are tattoos I've done and 90 per cent are just post-tattoo people. I'd be in studios anywhere in the world and I'd [ask] 'Oh can I take a photo?'¹²⁰

119 McFarlane continues to write about de Medici's work to the present day.

120 De Medici, 2012.

Figure 31. eX de Medici, 60 heads, exhibition detail, laminated inkjet prints, 59.4 x 84.1 cm, CCAS travelling exhibition, ACCA, Melbourne, 24 January – 2 March 1997, installation photograph

Source. Photographer: K Pleban. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

Figure 32. eX de Medici, 60 heads, laminated inkjet prints, 59.4 x 84.1 cm, CCAS travelling exhibition, ACCA, Melbourne, 24 January – 2 March 1997, installation photograph

Source. Photographer: K Pleban. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

The exhibition design was intentionally egalitarian and, as a touring exhibition, was beautifully conceived. It was cheap and practical to travel and uncomplicated to install. All 74 portraits were hung in a straight line at eye height, so that no single subject took precedence over any other (see Figure 32). The snapshots were prepared for exhibition as laminated A1 inkjet prints, again courtesy of de Medici's collaboration with Canon Australia, combining her then dual interests of photocopy and tattoo. These could be sponged clean and packed into one A4-size wooden crate. The number of works could be expanded or contracted depending on the size of the receiving venue. Barney remembers calls from venue curators who, with a show called *60 heads*, were surprised to find 74 portraits inside the travelling case. Smith had chosen the exhibition's name; confusing perhaps in its non-matching numbers, but it rolled off the tongue and had a clean graphic presence in publicity. It was 'hugely popular'¹²¹ with venues, touring from its opening at CCAS in March 1996, to Performance Space in Sydney (May 1996), Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne (March 1997), Institute of Modern Art (IMA) in Brisbane (June/July 1997), 24HR Art in Darwin (August 1997), through to its final Australian destination at the Goldfields Art Centre, Kalgoorlie in January 1998,¹²² where de Medici recalled that it was 'the first time miners had stepped into their regional gallery'.¹²³ The exhibition concluded touring, three years later, with an international showing at the 1998 *fotofeis: survey of international photography* in Glasgow, Scotland. 'Eventually,' recalled Barney, 'we had to say enough.'¹²⁴

The exhibition also marked the end of de Medici's long and fruitful alliance with BRG/CCAS. 'I felt that *60 heads* was a big effort and [that] afterwards it was time to step away and let other people in.'¹²⁵

The success of *60 heads* was assisted by its egalitarian structure, ease of touring and installation, and the curatorial ethos that was inherent to CCAS and driven largely by Barney during the period from 1995 to 2002. This ethos privileged the artist-generated exhibition, which was then supported and facilitated by intelligent curatorial guidance and often grounded with a sophisticated catalogue. De Medici was ahead of

121 Barney, 2012.

122 Touring of the exhibition to ACCA, IMA and 24HR Art was announced in a National Exhibitions Touring Support (NETS) media release, 19 October 1995, 1995 scrapbook, CCAS archives.

123 De Medici, 2012.

124 Barney, 2012.

125 De Medici, 2012.

her time, as was Barney for recognising the potential of the exhibition to transcend simple portraits. De Medici – who brought the concept to a receptive Barney as assistant curator – harbours a belief that then director Smith was less than enthusiastic about the exhibition concept, initially feeling that it was ‘too rough, it wasn’t glam, it wasn’t associated with a commercial gallery’.¹²⁶ The exhibition’s long touring life and high visitor numbers, however, bear out Barney’s judgement to proceed and, importantly, Smith’s support for her decision.

A second wave

60 heads marked the beginning of a second wave of touring exhibitions from CCAS from 1996 to 2002. Smith’s director’s report at the end of 1995 commented that, ‘To my knowledge before 1994, the CCAS had never organised an exhibition tour’,¹²⁷ but this claim is erroneous and reflects not only the lack of corporate memory available within CCAS by 1995, but also points to a reading of CCAS that disavows its historical links to BRG.

Arrangements made between Virgo, Ross Wolfe of the Australia Council’s VAB, and Arts ACT, included provision for CCAS to assume the funding previously given to BRG. This, with the approval of BRG members to hand over the BRG constitution to the newly incorporated CCAS, shows that, although BRG and CCAS embodied different constitutional frameworks, they were indivisibly linked as a contiguous organisation. A comparison of touring shows between BRG and CCAS reveals that the collective’s touring exhibitions were predicated on taking the local to a national audience in a necessarily modest way; by the mid-1990s, however, CCAS was confidently operating in the international market and asserting its right to international recognition.

BRG’s scrapbooks reveal three significant examples of interstate touring shows: an exchange with Iceberg Gallery in Melbourne in 1983; the tour of *Causes* to Hobart, Launceston, Perth and Adelaide in 1984; and the touring of *Nowhere utopia* to Brisbane in 1986. The impetus for the Iceberg show came from ex-BRG member Karilyn Brown, who was working at the Melbourne gallery in early 1983. Soon after her arrival in Melbourne, she wrote to Alder: ‘I was pondering the idea of a group show

¹²⁶ De Medici, 2012.

¹²⁷ Trevor Smith, ‘Director’s report’, 1995 Scrapbook, CCAS archives.

at Iceberg, representing the Bitumen River Gallery artists, what do you think?’¹²⁸ This first BRG travelling exhibition showed works by 14 artists using a variety of mediums including sculpture, lithographs, silk-screened posters, oil paintings, and crayon and pencil drawings.¹²⁹ Marcus Breen reviewed the show for the *Melbourne Times*, highlighting Tony Ayres’ silk-screens, Andrew Powell’s sculptures, and works by Stephanie Radok and Colin Russell. Alluding to Canberra’s dual national capital/local dichotomy, Breen wrote: ‘Stephanie Radok’s work exemplifies something of the restraint of the Canberra mentality, with some of the edge still intact.’¹³⁰ The exhibition provided the first non-institutional opportunity for Melbourne audiences to witness expressions of local emerging art from Canberra.

One memory collected from early BRG members on the occasion of BRG’s fifth birthday was from Powell, who submitted a pencil drawing of his Canberra lounge room that showed posters from early Canberra printmakers, along with a story of getting the work to Iceberg Gallery:

I remember some good things that happened in the early days of BRG – like our trip to Iceberg Gallery in Melbourne. 12 members submitted about 4 or 5 works each, [then] Dave Turnbull, myself and Nick Cosgrove drove my Kombi and Dave’s FC packed with all this art to Rankin Lane and the next day we hung the show. We stayed for a few days, across the lane in Julie Higginbotham’s studio, felt a bit funny hanging around all the rad femmes – but they were good to us, Julie and her friends drove us around and we pasted up posters (on a couple of the posh gallery art marts as well) bit like a cloak and dagger scene – anyway we drank lots of wine and coffee and the local Iceberg crowd seemed happy with the work, we even had some air time on [community radio station] 3cr ... [I]t was an interesting time – I remember the effort by people like Alison Alder and Paul Ford and others that made B>R>G> [sic] progress when the gallery was young – [N]o wage, living [sic] on the dole, making good out of not much – so good on them.¹³¹

128 Karilyn Brown, letter to Dianne, BRG, undated [c February/March 1983].

129 It was the second time that the work of young Canberra artists had been exhibited interstate; first showings from CSA student printmakers took place at the George Paton Gallery at the University of Melbourne in the early 1980s, organised by head of the Printmaking Workshop, Jorg Schmeisser.

130 Marcus Breen, ‘Life after Canberra’, *Melbourne Times*, June 1983.

131 BRG, ‘5th birthday show’, CCAS archives.

Less than three years after BRG opened, its tenacity and relevance were recognised when its second touring show gained modest local and Commonwealth funding. In early 1984, BRG for the first time secured funding from the Department of Territories and Local Government and the ACT Community Development Fund to tour the exhibition *Causes* to Praxis Gallery in Perth for an arrival date of 27 April. Ayres, who was travelling to Perth for Easter, offered to print the invitations at the Praxis workshop. March dates were added for Cockatoo Workshop in Launceston and Chameleon Gallery in Hobart, with the tour ending at the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide in May. Denton wrote to Chameleon in March to thank the gallery for 'the enthusiasm shown towards the "Causes" show'.¹³²

The last of the BRG travelling shows prior to amalgamation was *Nowhere utopia*. Norman Ainsworth and de Medici took two briefcases containing the photocopied works of 27 members to THAT Gallery, Brisbane, by train in June 1987, because, as de Medici recalled, 'We couldn't afford to freight the show'.¹³³ The show's poster was printed at Megalo.

There are significant differences in funding and organisation between BRG's exhibition tours of the 1980s and the CCAS touring programs of the mid-90s to early 2000s. The BRG collective tours exemplify the necessarily ad hoc approach of the time in which the elements to tour an exhibition were cobbled together; there were no precedents for touring prior to *Causes* and, in spite of the small one-off grant that facilitated its travel to Praxis, there was no ongoing funding to support a touring program and little experience to draw upon within the collective.

The touring programs from 1995 to 1997, with Barney and Smith working together, and from 1997 to 2002 with Barney as director, were markedly different. Barney's funded, full-time position encouraged long-term program planning and she was committed to touring CCAS-generated exhibitions nationally on a regular basis and internationally where possible. Planning and commitment, however, required funding. During the period from 1994 to 2002, which included the appointments of both Smith and Barney, there was no CPI increase in the annual Australia Council or Arts ACT grant to CCAS. As the Canberra-based exhibition program became increasingly ambitious, Barney needed to raise

132 Mark Denton, letter to Chameleon, 7 March 1984, CCAS archives.

133 De Medici, 2012.

additional funding for touring opportunities. Her solution was to raise money for one major touring show a year. Securing funding for an annual touring exhibition had positive ongoing repercussions throughout the program. It meant that Smith was able to announce in the 1995 director's report that, between the end of 1995 and 1997, 'there [will be] at least three exhibitions touring with a total of thirteen dates between them'.¹³⁴ These exhibitions would be developed by and open at CCAS and 'could be paid for with the touring funding and that would free us up a bit more money to spend on the rest of the year'.¹³⁵

CCAS sent a strong message of continuing support for Indigenous artists when Barney and Smith decided that the first exhibition to tour internationally would be the Indigenous exhibition *Black books*. The show had its genesis in 1994 when Barney, in her final year at the CSA Gallery, curated an exhibition of the same name of journals made by Aboriginal and Maori women. Including local Ngunnawal Aboriginal elder Matilda House and Canberra-based Maori musician Mereana Otene Waaka, the women were given loose-leaf journals in which they wrote every day for a month. The resulting works were exhibited on black plinths and patrons were given black gloves to wear while turning the pages.

Another manifestation of local/national collaboration through CCAS occurred when Smith offered Aboriginal urban artist Gordon Hookey, whom he met in Sydney, an artist-in-residence placement at Gorman House for early 1995. During the residency, Hookey developed a body of work for a solo show, *Interface inyaface*, that opened at CCAS Manuka gallery in April 1995. At the same time, Smith envisaged that Hookey would work with local Indigenous artists from the Ngunnawal, Wiradguri and other nations, on a collaborative exhibition as part of the Inaugural National Sculpture Forum. The resulting exhibition, *Naii Ngarrambai Wanggirali Burrangiri Nangi Dyannai Ngurui (the lay of the land is how you know your country; when you look behind you, you can always see your tracks)* (see Figure 33), was developed by gallery assistant Megan Elliot and opened at CCAS on 8 April.

134 Trevor Smith, 1995.

135 Barney, 2012.

Figure 33. *Naii Ngarrambai Wanggirali Burrangiri Nangi Dyannai Ngurui* (the lay of the land is how you know your country; when you look behind you, you can always see your tracks), installation photograph, detail

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

The media release stated that the exhibition comprised ‘Work by artists from the Ngunnawal community and Aboriginal artists living and working in Canberra focus[ing] on the region’s past, present and future’.¹³⁶ The exhibition garnered wide local press with reviews from Barron (*Canberra Times*) and Cousins (*Muse*), a story in *Canberra City News*, and two articles in the *Chronicle* – one on *Naii Ngarrambai Wanggirali Burrangiri Nangi Dyannai Ngurui* and one on Hookey.¹³⁷ The latter article described the exhibition as providing a ‘commentary on issues which arise from western cultural encroachment and impositions’.¹³⁸ *Work in progress*, the briefly-produced member’s newsletter of Gorman House Arts Centre, also featured Hookey’s story on its front page.¹³⁹

136 *What’s On?*, Gorman House Arts Centre newsletter, April 1995.

137 *Naii Ngarrambai Wanggirali Burrangiri Nangi Dyannai Ngurui*, 1995, CCAS archives.

138 *Chronicle*, ‘Encroachment and impositions’, 17 April 1995.

139 *Work in progress*, 4, 1, April 1995, Gorman House Arts Centre.

Figure 34. *Naii Ngarrambai Wanggirali Burrangiri Nangi Dyannai Ngurui* (the lay of the land is how you know your country; when you look behind you, you can always see your tracks), artists: Neville O'Neill, Kalara Gilbert, Megan Elliot, Gail Harradine, Michael Kennedy, Gordon Hookey, Arnold Williams, Jim 'Boza' Williams, Johnno Johnson, Aunty Matilda House, Joan Wingfield; exterior CCAS, Gorman House, April 1995

Source. Photographer: Eleanor Williams, reproduced with permission

Works from Barney's CSA Gallery exhibition *Black books*, and Smith and Elliot's CCAS exhibition *Naii Ngarrambai Wanggirali Burrangiri Nangi Dyannai Ngurui*, were also selected for an international showing. At the end of 1996, CCAS, in association with local Aboriginal elders Iris Clayton and House, toured *Black books* to the Australian Embassy in Manila via Barney's relationship with April Pressler, who was at that time Australia's cultural attaché to the Philippines. In this instance Barney maximised exhibition opportunities with work already at hand, a strategy she would continue to employ over the next five years at CCAS.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Another example of the CCAS commitment to Indigenous artists was the exhibition *Black humour*, which opened at CCAS on 12 July 1997. This exhibition subsequently toured to IMA, 24HR Art, Boomalli Gallery, Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne and Tandanya in Adelaide.

Canberra/Brasilia

Twenty years after the unfunded BRG collective opened the doors of its tiny reclaimed gallery space in the old shelter shed of St Christopher's School in Manuka, CCAS embarked on an international artist exchange. Smith conceived the ambitious idea to link the world's two 20th-century, planned national capitals, Canberra, Australia, and Brasilia, Brazil. He left CCAS in 1997 before the concept could be realised but, in 2001, with the Centenary of Federation providing additional funding for the contemporary art sector, Barney realised the concept with Smith's unqualified support. Through the process of developing the exchange, the parameters that previously governed CCAS touring exhibitions were extended to include the movement of and collaboration between artists from both countries. *Canberra/Brasilia* provides an outstanding example of a successful inter-country artist exchange using the relatively small resources of a regional contemporary art space. The project highlighted how effectively CCAS could perform when acting as host to a visiting international artist and, importantly, how far the organisation had come from its early preoccupation with supporting the development of local visual arts practice, to a mutually supported international undertaking.

This project would not have been undertaken by the NGA, nor would it, with its negligible potential for profit, have found a place within the commercial milieu. Moreover, the exchange could only have happened between Canberra and Brasilia. It was a site-specific collaboration on an international scale and yet the resulting exhibitions were inherently and intrinsically communal and personal; using a combination of old technology, Indigenous materials, and expressions of nature, the artists' works were enacted within and against outstanding planned-city designs. In thinking about *Canberra/Brasilia*, Barney's only givens were the major similarity between the two cities as planned capitals and the decision to use Shane Breyndard as the Canberra artist. It was an open-ended, curatorially fertile space.

Breyndard had lived in Canberra for 27 years and graduated from ANU SOA with first-class honours, the University medal and a Master of arts degree by research. His photographic art was concerned with the interaction of cultural values, specific architectures of the built environment, and its surrounding landscape. When Barney approached him to ask if he was

interested in the concept that Smith had broached five years previously, he was coming to the end of four years in London and returning to Canberra as managing editor of *Art Monthly Australia*. The timing was good. Barney additionally liked his ‘odd, esoteric take on things’.¹⁴¹ With Breyndard locked in, Barney travelled to Brasilia to find a local artist, who ‘knew Brasilia in the same way that Shane was really embedded in Canberra’.¹⁴²

The most interesting contemporary art is often generated by artists working at the margins and, for this reason, international visiting curators reliant on in-country dealers for introductions can find it difficult to access the artists they are hoping to find. This was the problem that Barney faced:

We got introduced to painter after painter after painter after painter – we were getting a really hard sell from dealers – we went to Sao Paolo but I was pretty clear in my mind that it wasn’t going to be a Sao Paolo or a Rio artist.¹⁴³

Back in Brasilia and at the end of another long day of consecutive meetings where the art on show included ‘painting, more painting; kind of irrelevant subject matter that had nothing to do with the city’, Barney was beginning to feel ‘hysterical’.¹⁴⁴ She arrived for the day’s last meeting – at a classic Oscar Niemeyer-designed apartment block in the heart of the original 1960s-built accommodation precinct – to meet with artist Marta Penner:

[T]here were kids everywhere and mess everywhere and she’s pulling out these pinhole photographs of the Brasilia interstices, all the crummy places between the shiny designed Oscar Niemeyer bits that only someone who lives there could possibly know. I knew the moment I saw those things that this was it. I got back to her and I said ‘I want you to do the show’ and she said ‘I’m amazed that you picked me because I’m not really in the crowd and my partner said to me “Why are you even bothering to meet with those people? They never pick us”’ and I said ‘No you’re definitely it. You’re it. I have no doubt’.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Barney, 2012.

¹⁴² Barney, 2012.

¹⁴³ Barney, 2012.

¹⁴⁴ Barney, 2012.

¹⁴⁵ Barney, 2012.

Barney determined that Breynard and Penner would travel to each other's cities to make individual and collaborative works: Breynard to Brasilia in June and Penner to Canberra in late August – early September, with the results being exhibited at CCAS and in Brasilia and Rio. The catalogue essay reveals that the exhibition incorporated:

a collection of the documents, objects and photographs from [the artists'] urban work. It is a coalescence of visual art, urban planning, public art, text and architecture; and a contemporary reflection on life in two of the world's most unusual cities.¹⁴⁶

The artists' experiences whilst in each other's countries were markedly different. While Penner had all the advantages of the CCAS networks to support the development of her work in Canberra, Breynard's experience was somewhat negatively coloured by not having a host gallery in Brasilia. Based at the university, he was more reliant on Penner as a facilitator and a working partner. Barney believes this meant it took longer for Breynard's concept to emerge. 'His experience wasn't as streamlined as hers [but] in the end it all came together'.¹⁴⁷

Breynard pursued two ideas in Brasilia. The first was working with Brazil's ubiquitous, Indigenous bed, the hammock, designed to be cool and transportable. The second comprised laser-cut timber names – painted in eucalypt colours – of the eucalypt trees native to the Canberra region. These were installed in the Roberto Burle Marx-designed landscape around Niemeyer's superquadra apartment blocks, and then displayed on the walls at CCAS (see Figure 35).

Breynard's laser-cut works, and the catalogue essays, are indicative of a major problem with international touring shows with a text component that are enacted between countries without a common language. The tree names and the catalogue essays were both being shown/read in Canberra and Brasilia and so needed to be translated into Portuguese. Barney recalls the process:

The first translator we had was a bit of a clunker and the second had a nice turn of phrase so some of those essays in the catalogue are a pleasure to read and some are not so pleasurable.¹⁴⁸

146 Jane Barney (ed), *Canberra/Brasilia*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, 2001, p 10.

147 Barney, 2012.

148 Barney, 2012.

Figure 35. Shane Breynard and Marta Penner, *Canberra Brasilia*, CCAS artist exchange and travelling exhibition at CCAS, 8 September – 20 October 2001, installation photograph

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

Penner shared that characteristic of Breynard's that Barney had so liked: 'an odd esoteric take on things'. She had lived in Brasilia for 15 years and began photographing around the city during her master's degree, three years before Barney met her. The pinhole camera images – realised using a coffee can with a hole punched in its base – that excited Barney ostensibly had little to do with the modernist Niemeyer-designed city. Penner photographed the city from an entirely unexpected and quirky perspective that could only have been obvious to someone whose knowledge of the shining planned spaces extended to the interstitial; those unseen or otherwise forgotten places inhabited and traversed by the marginalised and dispossessed; spaces that neither Brasilia nor Canberra allowed for in the city planning process.¹⁴⁹

When Penner arrived in Canberra, she went straight to CCAS and immediately set off on foot with her pinhole camera towards the Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)

¹⁴⁹ The question of whether cultural precincts can be effectively imposed on spaces in a city or should be allowed to arise naturally is one that comes up in forums in Canberra. It is currently particularly relevant to the developing Kingston Foreshore precinct, as first mooted in the *Final report* of the Select Committee on Cultural Activities and Facilities, ACT Legislative Assembly (June 1991).

building. From that first walk she began taking 'these amazing pictures ... She kept coming across homeless people'.¹⁵⁰ As with her work in Brasilia, however, Penner was not interested in photographing the people but in exploring the in-between spaces, situated around the designed spaces, that these people inhabited. The resulting body of work from Canberra bears many similarities to those photographs made by her in Brasilia.

In Canberra and Brasilia, Breynard and Penner worked with hammocks. In Brasilia, in a collaborative work titled *entre-redes*, reflecting Breynard's interest in the intersections between the built environment and nature, the artists suspended hammocks between the uppermost branches of the large trees that ringed the superquadra apartment blocks, connecting individual apartments to the natural environment. In Canberra, Penner's installation of hammocks, which were hung through the stairwells of the inner-city Currong Apartments, fulfilled the artist's interest in spaces that existed within and yet outside planned affluence (see Figure 36). Additionally, this installation reflected the gulf between contemporary art practice and civic rules, recalling the tone of some of the public response to the 1994 Ainslie Avenue billboards exhibition *I am you*. Barney related the brush with officialdom:

[Penner] strung up hammocks between the stairwells and all the tenants were coming up and saying it looks great and taking pictures and within an hour and a half the housing people had turned up and said 'Get those hammocks down from there someone might jump'!¹⁵¹

Breynard's Brasilia experience and the touring component of the exhibition to Brasilia would have been more effective with a host gallery in place in Brasilia that was able to facilitate Breynard's work as CCAS facilitated Penner's visit and exhibition. As it was, Barney arrived at the Brasilia exhibition to find herself in the kind of Niemeyer-designed gallery space that, in Brasilia, are 'a dime a dozen'.¹⁵² The thrill of attending opening night within the iconic architecture was tempered by the realisation that the exhibition was being held in an 'under-funded, government-owned Niemeyer space that [was] falling apart [with] three people and a dog coming through for an exhibition opening'.¹⁵³

150 Barney, 2012.

151 Barney, 2012.

152 Barney, 2012.

153 Barney, 2012.

Figure 36. Shane Breynard and Marta Penner, *Canberra Brasilia*, CCAS artist exchange and travelling exhibition at CCAS, 8 September – 20 October 2001, installation photograph of hammocks strung between apartments in the Currong apartments, Canberra

Source. CCAS image archive, reproduced with permission

The value of the project lay in more than the sum of its parts. Its successful conclusion signalled the maturing of an arts space that began as a contested, local, unfunded collective space arising in response to local social and political imperatives at the beginning of the 1980s. The BRG collective displayed an early commitment to increasing the national profile of local artists with several modest tours of BRG exhibitions and through its initial coordinators, Alder and Virgo, attending national forums. When the CCAS board hired Smith as director at the end of 1993, it did so in order to bring CCAS into line with national and international paradigmatic changes in curatorial and exhibition practice. Although the decision was not without detractors, the appointments of Smith, and then Barney, transformed CCAS. During their collaboration as director/curator in the mid-1990s and subsequently though Barney's time as director, national and international touring programs reflected the growing maturity of the Canberra visual arts community. *Canberra/Brasilia*, Barney's last major project for CCAS before she left the organisation in 2002, positioned CCAS as a nationally relevant, fully funded, confident contemporary art space, executing curatorial decisions that defined local practice as internationally relevant and mutually supported.

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