

CONCLUSION

Late autumn in the Australian Capital Territory is all limpid sky and crisp outline. In 2013, as Canberra turned 100 years old, a remarkable work of art rose through the crystalline air: an otherworldly creature, exuding symbolic references to the ancient natural environment below and to the planned, twentieth-century capital nestled within. *Skywhale*, the hot air balloon designed by Australian artist Patricia Piccinini, was aloft (see Figure 37). Piccinini's breathtakingly strange creature, whose evolutions and adaptations are connected to ideas of human intervention into the natural world, reflects the Canberra in which she grew up. In its colours of sky, limestone plains, treed ridges and escarpments, in its imaginative physical characteristics that combine allusions to the natural and the man-made, and in the passionate conversations that surrounded its commissioning and delivery, *Skywhale's* artistic complexity echoes Canberra's own.

This national capital is enlivened and humanised by its warm and inclusive arts community. Outsiders might perceive that the currently well-resourced local arts sector is a direct outcome of Commonwealth-supported national capital life. This is simply wrong. It is instead, and overwhelmingly, the product of passionate, consistent, local community engagement and activism over more than 40 years. Today, the city benefits from the inspired, local political and arts leadership of the past and the continuing spirit of mentorship, collaboration and friendship that pervades the broad arts community. The deep regard for excellence in visual arts education through the ANU School of Art and Design (SofA) has continued to grow throughout this new century. A broad, tightly knit spread of student, emerging, mid-career and senior artists make their homes and their works in the ACT.



Figure 37. Patricia Piccinini, *Skywhale*, 2013

Source. Photographer: Martin Ollman, reproduced with permission

Echoes of the burgeoning arts community of the early 1980s resonate strongly in Canberra today. Artists, arts workers and institutions that emerged at that time are now nationally and internationally effective and highly visible protagonists and crucibles of Australian art development and practice. Among them is nationally acclaimed artist Alison Alder, who returned to Canberra in 2010 to head Megalo Print Studios, the organisation whose birth she assisted 30 years before. Alder transferred to the ANU SofA in 2012 as head of the Printmaking Workshop; the same workshop where she trained from 1978 to 1981. Only a brave person would have predicted that the small group of impoverished students, emerging artists and activists who established Megalo in the tumbledown shed in Ainslie Village, and then Bitumen River Gallery (BRG) in the abandoned bus shelter at St Christopher's Church, would go on to have national and international careers. The organisations they founded in activism and hope have retained their individuality and are vital threads in the contemporary cultural fabric of both the ACT and Australia.

Statistics reveal that the ACT has the highest per-capita involvement in arts and culture in the country. Within a population of just over 400,000, this reflects the community's continued arts and cultural literacy and its hunger for the social enhancements that cultural engagement offers. Statistics likewise support the tremendous economic contribution that the arts bring to the national capital.

There remains, however, an inherent fragility in the ACT's arts and cultural fabric. Without a local council and, therefore, no access to council arts funding, continued sustainable funding is dependent on the vagaries of elected local governments, ministerial appointments and bureaucratic support; the quality of incumbent ministerial engagement and bureaucratic follow-through. Historically, those periods when the sector has flourished in Canberra have occurred when the needs of the vibrant arts and cultural communities are met by an engaged government that courageously implements responsive arts policy. Until sustainable local arts funding is mandated as bipartisan, each generation will be called to activism for survival.

A confluence of events in 2016–17 exquisitely illustrated this recurrent fragility. In 2011, senior arts figures, concerned with a steady decline in local arts funding from a high of \$1.1 million in 2005, established an independent forum, The Childers Group. The group aimed to advocate for arts workers and practitioners and, through public forums and the compilation of statistics, provide timely, ongoing information to assist government in decision-making. In early 2016, the Australia Council (which makes the second-lowest per-capita contribution to the ACT)¹ announced catastrophic de-funding of the national visual arts sector. These cuts were met with an entirely unexpected decrease in local project funding, 'the largest decrease in living memory'.² Despite the flurry of broad arts activity in the lead-up to the national capital's centenary in 2013, in late December 2016, when the ACT's principal funding body, Arts ACT, finally released its 2017 project funding commitment, the local arts community were blindsided. At just \$300,000, it reflected a significant and unaccountable loss in funding from the 2005 high of \$1.1 million.

1 In 2014/15 the ACT received \$1.5 million from the Australia Council, the least of all jurisdictions and equivalent to the second-least per capita at around \$3.84 each – just slightly better than Queensland which received \$17.6 million, around \$3.68 each. See 'Facts', *The Childers Group*, childersgroup.com.au.

2 The Childers Group archive, February 2017, www.childersgroup.com.au/2017/02/.

Once more, as it had throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the community rose as one, wasting no time in alerting the new Arts Minister, Gordon Ramsay, who was confirmed by the Labor government under Chief Minister Andrew Barr in the portfolios of Attorney General, and Arts, Community and Veteran Affairs in September 2016, to the parlous state of project funding and ministerial and bureaucratic support for sustainable practice. Activism arose on several united fronts – from the general community, from practitioners and workers, and through the Childers Group. It included activist events, public rallies, panels and forums, submissions to the minister and presentations to the Legislative Assembly.

The new minister's extensive background in community consultation was immediately apparent. An additional \$230,000 in project funding was released in early 2017, with recipients to come from those who had applied for the 2017 round. Reflecting Ramsay's serious intent, Arts ACT was incorporated into the department of the Chief Minister and Ramsay and his staff embarked on a period of broad community consultation. Speaking at the *Arts value forum* in August 2017, his commitment to arts and culture as a prerequisite for a healthy polis was clear:

If the ability to access the arts and the capability to make art are inherently important to human wellbeing and community, we must ensure we are fostering cultural democracy – providing the places, spaces, empowerment, and resources – the capability – for everyone to engage with the creative process in whatever way brings added fulfilment their lives.

The results of broad arts community consultation are reflected in the June 2018/19 ACT budget, which delivered highly significant growth in funding for local arts, including: a \$750,000 annual commitment for project funding, \$230,000 for arts events, and a commitment to return any underspends in the arts budget directly back to arts endeavours. In 2018, this has yielded an additional one-off \$325,000 for community outreach art projects. In all, the government commitment to local grant funding has exceeded \$1 million for the 2018 year. Additionally, application processes for project funding have been streamlined with application dates consistent across years.

The minister and the government's commitment to the sector as a whole is borne out by increased and new funding for: a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts officer; funds for sector capacity building; an asset replacement scheme; funds to support innovative programming

at community centres; training in the stage and theatre industry; artist exchanges, upgrades to CMAG and the CTC and conservation works and improvements to the ACT's Historic Places, Lanyon Homestead, Calthorpes' House and Mugga Mugga; as well as a one-off, \$5 million grant to establish a screen industry development fund. Funding continues for arts organisations, the Cultural Facilities Corporation, the ACT Book of the Year award and community outreach programs. In all, the government's budgetary commitment to arts and culture in the 2018/19 year exceeds \$26 million. This time around, great need has been met by a courageous ministerial response.

In charting the development of arts practice in the city between the 1920s and 2001, and within BRG and Canberra Contemporary Art Space (CCAS) between 1978 and 2001, this history has exposed the rapid evolution of Australia's modern national capital. Created principally as the federal capital, the city has been transformed into a national capital space that is a complex, dynamic centre for contemporary arts practice and exhibition.

There are fertile opportunities for further research in this area. The loss of Australia Council funding to the contemporary arts sector in May 2016 indicates a clear and pressing need to assist arts funding bodies and arts ministers' understanding of the critical importance of not only restoring but increasing funding to contemporary visual art organisations in every state and territory. These spaces are vital to Australian artists' continued development and to international perceptions of Australia as contemporarily culturally relevant. This could be done through an analysis of the history and importance of the sector's national body, Contemporary Art Organisations Australia. Comparative studies of regional and city-based contemporary art spaces would also assist relevant bodies in understanding their importance. A comparative study of contemporary art spaces in the modern planned federal capitals of Canberra and Brasilia would be fascinating and timely. These two cities, which Trevor Smith and, later, Jane Barney so creatively conceived as ripe for artists' exchanges and exhibitions in the 1990s, would today present opportunities for assessing the impacts of local and federal funding on the development of contemporary art and the effects of that funding and development on international perceptions of two modern, national federal capitals.³

3 Over summer 2018/19 the author and her Brazilian collaborator conceived a long-form, collaborative curatorial/multiple-artist exhibition and exchange project, titled '*Curating Canberra Brasilia*', between these two planned capitals, with exhibitions to be staged in both cities in autumn 2021.

One of Australia's most pressing issues concerns reconciliation between, and rehabilitation of, Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations. Locally, the BRG/CCAS archives provide considerable material for research into its engagement with local and national Indigenous artists in exhibition, building on the work done in this research. While the parameters of this history do not allow for an in-depth study in this area, further research would contribute to positive public perceptions of contemporary Indigeneity in Australia. A deeper analysis of CCAS's engagement with performance art during the 1990s is also rich in research possibilities. Analysing the connections between the Sculpture Workshop at Canberra School of Art (CSA) and performance art emanating from CCAS would further unique aspects of art practice in the national capital and assist today's artists, arts workers, art consumers and local and national funding bodies in continuing to build a picture of Canberra's contemporary arts development.

One of the aims of this history has been to make a thorough analytical response to Timothy Pascoe's misconception of the importance of visual arts development in Canberra. He characterised this, in the mid-1980s, as 'not particularly strong' and as lacking the 'opportunity for uniqueness'.⁴ While those with a vested interest in local contemporary arts initiatives would intuitively oppose such claims, recent federal government funding policy has revealed a return to views that devalue the importance of local contemporary arts spaces in our communities. CCAS, along with Australia's network of contemporary art spaces, arose as an unfunded collective in response to local needs. Federal and local arts funding from the mid-1980s through to the present day has assisted the ongoing development of these grassroots organisations. Today they are profoundly effective conduits for artists in their journey from art schools through to their representation in commercial, regional, state and national galleries; in international art museums; and in Australian and international biennales. Donal Fitzpatrick, head of the School of Design and Art at Curtin University of Technology, characterises the contemporary art space as providing: 'The heavy lifting of a vibrant visual culture,' allowing for 'the unsteady and the tumultuous, in spaces electric with the risk of failure and prickling with unease.'⁵

4 Pascoe, 1985, p 57.

5 Donal Fitzpatrick, *21st century CAOs: a forward plan for contemporary art*, Sydney, Contemporary Art Organisations Australia, 2010, p 19.

CCAS developed a solution-focused response to the 2016 decrease in Australia Council funding. In the week prior to the announcement, director David Broker successfully interpreted the political mood and, in preparing CCAS curator Alexander Boynes and then gallery manager Sabrina Baker for funding cuts, called a meeting to consider the gallery's guiding principles of innovation and resilience: innovation in maintaining a vital and relevant exhibition program with reduced resources, and resilience in the face of necessary changes, the most confronting of which was the need to temporarily abort the long-established residency program, which had provided year-long residencies to emerging artists. In the immediate short-term, and reflective of the unique local solutions to funding crises enacted in the 1980s, CCAS announced a fundraising auction for which the \$250 tickets sold out on release.⁶ Fifty-two local artists, from emerging to those with international reputations, who had exhibited at CCAS over the preceding three years, donated works that were then awarded, in blind pairings, to 52 ticketed patrons. The success of the auction showed the Canberra community's deep affection for, engagement with and understanding of CCAS's critical importance to Canberra's continued contemporary arts development.

In 2017, the organisation decreased staffing to two – Broker and curator Alexander Boynes – and staged another successful fundraiser. After a one-year hiatus during 2017, CCAS has extended three residencies to emerging artists in 2018. While this vitally important contemporary arts organisation has displayed great resilience since Australia Council funding cuts in 2016, it is imperative that funding be restored.

For over 30 years, the CCAS gallery has occupied exhibition space at Gorman House within the recently rebadged Ainslie and Gorman Art Centres. Now, with significant expenditure required to bring the current gallery up to standard, it is undeniably past time for the organisation to relocate to more appropriate premises.

The arrangement between the Drill Hall Gallery and the Australian National Gallery in the 1980s allowed the best of contemporary Australian and international art exhibitions to be staged outside the confines of the National Gallery. The arrangement came to an end, under director Betty Churcher in 1991, in the face of staffing and budget cuts. NGA Contemporary was revived by director Ron Radford in 2014, with

6 Conceived and managed by then CCAS Gallery Manager, Sabrina Baker.

exhibitions staged in the architecturally significant lakeside building, East Space, owned by the National Capital Authority, adjacent to the NGA and the National Portrait Gallery (NPG). The final of three exhibitions in that space, *The last temptation: the art of Ken and Julia Yonetani*, provided a provocative, visually stunning conclusion to this second iteration of an NGA-run contemporary art annexe. Under the yoke of continued efficiency dividends applied to the federally funded national institutions, director Gerard Vaughan closed NGA Contemporary in 2016.

This now empty gallery space, situated within the national capital cultural triangle, in close proximity to the nation's major cultural institutions, provides a logical and ideal location for the next chapter in the CCAS journey, allowing for increased public accessibility and profile for the national capital's critically important contemporary art space and its exhibiting artists.⁷

The second decade of the twenty-first century in Canberra has witnessed increasing activity in contemporary art, dance, music, performance, design and literature from young practitioners with an emphasis on cross-art form collaboration. What distinguishes this surge from that occurring in the late 1970s and 1980s is that today's artists stand on the shoulders of giants; of those whose early and, ultimately, successful battles for recognition, for spaces and for funding, amongst the clamorous rhetoric of the national capital space's cultural pre-eminence, laid the fertile ground for subsequent generations of arts practitioners. This study, and the continued writing of our local art history, means that their early achievements, critical to the success of today's visual arts community, will not remain unsung.

7 In January 2020, Canberra Contemporary Art Space relocated to East Space after 32 years at Gorman House. It will remain in this location until it moves with other arts organisations, including ArtSound, Canberra Glassworks, CraftACT, M16, Megalo Access Arts and Photo Access, to the Kingston Arts Precinct in 2023–24. In February 2017 the ACT government announced developer Geocon, with partners Fender Katsalidis architects and Oculus, as successful tenderers for construction of the Kingston Arts Precinct. Contracts were exchanged in July 2019. The development will comprise offices, gallery spaces and workshops for Canberra arts organisations, accommodation for visiting artists, outdoor arts and recreation areas, carparking and mixed residential. Construction for all stages is to be completed by mid-2026. The development completes the plan first outlined 28 years ago in the final report of the Bill Wood–chaired Select Committee on Cultural Activities and Facilities, in consultation with the Canberra arts and culture community.

This text is taken from *How Local Art Made Australia's National Capital*,
by Anni Doyle Wawrzyńczak, published 2020 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.