

# INTRODUCTION

*How local art made Australia's national capital* considers Canberra from a perspective that pays homage to art and culture as a generative force in the city's development, unfolding the complex circumstances that gave rise to a distinctive citywide arts practice.

Canberra's contemporary arts sphere is the result of junctures between two distinct iterations of space: national capital space and local space. The arts community that emerged is unique – the product of a complex set of circumstances as the ideals of the national capital butted up against the realities of local life. This pre-eminent iteration of place – the national political centre of a young but advanced democracy – ensured fertile tensions arose that directly impacted on the genesis and development of the city's contemporary arts practice in ways not seen elsewhere in the country.

This history of two contemporary art galleries is set within the broader narrative of the development of arts and culture from the 1920s to the 2000s. The rise of Bitumen River Gallery (BRG), which was established in Australia's national capital in 1981, and Canberra Contemporary Art Space (CCAS), which followed in 1987, illustrates the triumph of local arts practice and community over the cultural imperatives of nation-building.

During 20 years in Canberra I have experienced, and seen extended to many others, particularly warm and useful interactions within CCAS and across the broad spectrum of local arts and cultural practices. In a city primarily constructed to accommodate the business of federal politics, the arts scene is, by contrast, marked by a distinct lack of political correctness. I determined to find out why this was so.

From the earliest days of the formation of arts societies and the activities of The Australian National University (ANU) in the 1940s, to a broad array of community endeavours, there is much evidence of Canberra's arts community's commitment to expanding a local cultural agenda from within the confines of Commonwealth-controlled funding and political ideology. As the 1970s and 1980s progressed, social activism became a forceful expression of this community strength. Political engagement was evidentially hardwired into Canberra life, itself a product of the continuing tussle between national and local politics. Social activism emerged as a powerful force in the early 1970s, resulting in a raft of desperately needed social initiatives, including the 1973 establishment in Canberra of Beryl, Australia's second women's refuge. By 1978 social activism was instrumental in the birth of contemporary arts practice as fledgling local print and poster makers began responding to local, national and international social concerns.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 1980s, activists became increasingly insistent in Canberra, alerting federal government and local representatives to rapidly growing needs in local arts and culture. They ensured that, by the time the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) achieved self-government in 1992, members of the territory's Legislative Assembly were fully aware of the community's desires and needs and were determined to fulfil them.

The Commonwealth Government's uncertain commitment to Canberra over the first half of the twentieth century, which was transformed under Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies in 1958, provided fertile ground for emerging tensions. From the late 1960s, based on the arts funding models of the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, the Commonwealth sought to develop nationally recognised, flagship performing arts companies in Canberra, which was entirely at odds with the realities of local need and desire, and Canberra's small population.<sup>2</sup> During this period, the emphasis on performing arts came at the expense

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1 Megalo Print Studio and Gallery (Megalo) and the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) have a large collection of prints and posters by Canberra artists. The majority of early works remain unattributed and, more than 40 years on from 1978, there is an urgent need for resources to be allocated to attribution while there are still living artists who may remember the particular circumstances under which these posters were made. For posters evidencing the work of Jobless Action (the Commonwealth-funded, local job-creation organisation established in 1976) see for example: Paul Ford, *Unemployment: a creative alternative – Jobless Action* (1981–82) and David Morrow, *May Day '81: march for full employment* (1981). Both examples are held in the Megalo Poster Archives.

2 There are distinct similarities between the development of national arts policy in Australia from 1967 and the policies of the United Kingdom and United States, which were developed in 1964 and 1965. Indications of similarities in language and policy development can be found as follows:

of the visual arts. The 1970s and 1980s were marked by increasing tensions between the Commonwealth and the local community as the latter sought to control local arts and the cultural trajectory from within this focus on national identity. In the visual arts, the drive for national excellence promulgated by the Commonwealth led arts consultant Timothy Pascoe to erroneously conclude, in 1985, that local artists enjoyed higher investment and outcomes in comparison to their colleagues in other Australian cities, because of the presence of the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), which opened in 1982.<sup>3</sup>

The transition to self-government, which commenced in 1989, was of fundamental importance to Canberra's maturing art scene. Foremost among the positive benefits flowing from the release from Commonwealth control that followed self-government from 1992, was the ability of successive local governments to drive a coherent and bipartisan local arts and cultural agenda.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the latter half of the century, women exerted a profound influence over the development of Canberra's arts milieu. In the 1960s and 1970s, they set up creative women's groups to combat the loneliness and lack of extended support groups that were a feature of Canberra

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Australia: Harold Holt, 'Australian cultural activities', Ministerial statement, House of Representatives, 1 November 1967, [historichansard.net/senate/1967/19671107\\_senate\\_26\\_s36/#subdebate-17-0-s0](http://historichansard.net/senate/1967/19671107_senate_26_s36/#subdebate-17-0-s0), accessed 22 May 2013; *Canberra Times*, 'Council grants to arts', 12 December 1968, p 33.

United States: National Council on the Arts policy statement in National Council on the Arts, *The first annual report on the National Council on the Arts*, 1964–65, Washington DC, 1965, [www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-Annual-Report-1964-1965.pdf](http://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-Annual-Report-1964-1965.pdf), accessed 23 May 2013. See especially 'Foreword' and 'Policy statement', pp 1–2.

United Kingdom: Jennie Lee, *A policy for the arts – the first steps*, London, HMSO, 15 February 1965, p 6, [action.labour.org.uk/page/-/blog%20images/policy\\_for\\_the\\_arts.pdf](http://action.labour.org.uk/page/-/blog%20images/policy_for_the_arts.pdf), accessed 26 May 2013; Lawrence Black, 'Not only a source of expenditure but a source of income', in Christiane Eisenberg, Rita Gerlach and Christian Handke (eds), *Cultural industries: the British experience in international perspective*, Berlin, Humboldt University, 2006, p 120, [edoc.hu-berlin.de/conferences/culturalindustries/proc/culturalindustries.pdf](http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/conferences/culturalindustries/proc/culturalindustries.pdf), accessed 22 May 2013.

The companies nominated as flagship companies, pre-1985, were Canberra Theatre Trust, Human Veins Dance Theatre, Opera ACT, and Canberra Symphony Orchestra.

<sup>3</sup> See Timothy Pascoe, *Arts in the ACT: funding priorities and grant administration*, Canberra, ACT Arts Development Board, Commonwealth of Australia, 1985, p 57. Pascoe Report recommendations for flagship performing arts companies from 1985: Theatre ACT, Human Veins Dance Theatre, Crafts Council of the ACT Canberra Symphony Orchestra. See Chapter 2 for a close reading of this ACT Arts Development Board-commissioned report into the state of the arts in the ACT.

<sup>4</sup> See Australian Capital Territory, Parliamentary debates, Legislative Assembly, Hansard, 26 August 2004: 4323; Select Committee on Cultural Activities and Facilities, *Final report*, Canberra, ACT Legislative Assembly, June 1991; Standing Committee on Planning, Development and Infrastructure, *Report no. 9*, Canberra, ACT Legislative Assembly, December 1992.

life because of the small and transient population, and they established the first commercial galleries. Their critical influence, in contrast to the trend of a male-dominated art scene in the rest of late twentieth-century Australia, is felt throughout the history of BRG/CCAS: as teachers and mentors; as students and activists who went on to establish printmaking workshops and exhibition venues; and as coordinators, curators and artists who collectively influenced the development of local practice.

## Histories of Canberra

Studies of Canberra's history are increasing in number and breadth as writers respond to the inherent complexities of national capital development. Recent publications have covered Canberra's Indigenous history;<sup>5</sup> the city's conception, planning and execution as a national centre;<sup>6</sup> the relationship of Canberra to its national cultural institutions;<sup>7</sup> notable Canberra buildings and general architecture;<sup>8</sup> its citizens;<sup>9</sup> and its broad history.<sup>10</sup> It has been the custom for some of the national cultural institutions to publish widely in their areas, from the single sheets outlining aspects of Canberra's development issued by the National Archives of Australia to

5 See, for example, Ann Jackson-Nakano, *The Kamberri: a history from the records of Aboriginal families in the Canberra-Queanbeyan district and surrounds 1820–1927 and historical overview 1928–2001* (Weerawa History Series, Canberra, 2001). Also see ACT Government Genealogy Project, *Our kin our country* (Canberra, ACT Government, August 2012, [www.communityservices.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/394385/CSD\\_GSR\\_web.pdf](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/394385/CSD_GSR_web.pdf), accessed 7 November 2015).

6 See, for example, six booklets published by the Chief Minister's Department to mark the centenary of Canberra: Greg Wood, *Maps and makers* and *The community that was* (2009); David Headon, *Crystal palace to golden trowels* and *Those other Americans* (2009) and *Beyond the boundaries* (2012); Ian Warden, *Think of it! Dream of it! In six snapshots* (2009).

7 Chris Beer, 'The production of Canberra and its national cultural institutions: imagination and practice of national capital space, national leadership and transnational and national museum practice, and Commonwealth managerial space', conference paper, Australasian Political Studies Association, Newcastle, NSW, 25–27 September 2006.

8 For specific buildings, see, for example, principally Lenore Coltheart, *Albert Hall: the heart of Canberra* (Sydney, UNSW Press, 2014); Sarah Rood and Belinda Ensor, *Olims Hotel Canberra: through the ages* (Sydney, CL Creations, 2007). For general architecture, see, for example, Ken Charlton, *Federal capital architecture: Canberra, 1911–1939* (Canberra, National Trust of Australia, 1984); Andrew Metcalfe, *Canberra architecture* (Watermark Architectural Guides, Boorowa, NSW, Watermark, 2006); Tim Reeves and Alan Roberts, *100 Canberra houses: a century of capital architecture* (Canberra, Halstead Press, 2013); Ken Charlton, Paola Favaro and Bronwen Jones, *The contribution of Enrico Taglietti to Canberra's architecture* (Canberra, Royal Australian Institute of Architects, ACT Chapter, 2007).

9 See, for example, Brian Smith and Heide Smith, *A portrait of Canberra and of Canberraans 1979–2012* (Narooma, NSW, Hobbs Point Publishing, 2012); 'From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: a century of women's contributions to Canberra' ([www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/dlkg/](http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/dlkg/), accessed 15 August 2014).

10 See principally Nicholas Brown, *A history of Canberra* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); also see Paul Daley, *Canberra* (City Series, Sydney, NewSouth Publishing, 2012).

that institution's ambitious centenary research guide *Government records about the Australian Capital Territory*, to the wealth of material held by the National Library of Australia (NLA) and made available online.<sup>11</sup>

The Centenary of Canberra in 2013 provided further impetus for projects such as the Australian Women's archive project *From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: a century of women's contributions to Canberra*.<sup>12</sup> Recently, small booklets produced by those involved in social initiatives, such as the women's refuge Beryl, Toora Women Inc (established in the early 1980s) and Majura Women's Group (founded in 1981),<sup>13</sup> have all contributed to a fuller picture of Canberra's development.

Studies of important Canberra art institutions have appeared in recent years. Michael Agostino's *The Australian National University School of Art: a history of the first 65 years* (2009) gathers together rich archival material relating to the development of that institution from the Canberra Technical College to the workshops and lecturers, visiting artists and arts initiatives of the Canberra School of Art (CSA). To coincide with the centenary, Megalo Print Studio and Gallery (Megalo) published *Megalomania: 33 years of posters made at Megalo Print Studio 1980–2013*, an abridged history comprising an introduction, a selection of hundreds of prints produced by artists working with that organisation over 30 years, and interviews.<sup>14</sup> Another centenary publication, a short history of the Australian National Capital Artists (ANCA) studios and gallery, *Intensity of purpose: 21 years of ANCA*, was published to coincide with an exhibition of the same name at the Canberra Museum and Gallery (CMAG – established 1998).<sup>15</sup> As well, former NGA director Betty Churcher,

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11 For example, National Library of Australia, 'Griffin and early Canberra collection', Selected Library Collections ([www.nla.gov.au/selected-library-collections/griffin-and-early-canberra-collection](http://www.nla.gov.au/selected-library-collections/griffin-and-early-canberra-collection)), and 'Focus: Canberra', Research Guides and Subject Listings ([www.nla.gov.au/research-guides/federation/focus-canberra](http://www.nla.gov.au/research-guides/federation/focus-canberra), accessed 10 August 2014); Ted Ling, *Government records about the Australian Capital Territory* (Canberra, National Archives of Australia, 2013, [www.archives.act.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/562544/Canberra\\_Research\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.archives.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/562544/Canberra_Research_Guide.pdf), accessed 3 April 2012).

12 Henningham, 2013.

13 Farzana Choudhury (ed), *Opening a new door: the herstory of Beryl Women Inc. 1975–2015*, Canberra, Beryl Women Inc, 2015; Elena Roseman, *Talking like a Toora woman*, Canberra, Toora Women Inc, 2004. See also Helen Skeat (ed), *Majura Women's Group celebrating 25 years: a selection of recollections, reflections, images and quotations* (Canberra, Majura Women's Group Inc, 2006). This commemorative booklet accompanied an exhibition at CMAG.

14 Chris Wallace with Robyn Archer, Kathryn Ross and Emily Sykes, *Megalomania: 33 years of posters made at Megalo Print Studio 1980–2013*, Canberra, Megalo Print Studio + Gallery, 2013. The publication coincided with an exhibition of the same name at Megalo.

15 Alison Bell (ed), *Intensity of purpose: 21 years of ANCA*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra, Australian National Capital Artists, 2013.

assisted by Lucy Quinn, produced *Treasures of Canberra*, a book of selected artworks from Canberra's national cultural institutions.<sup>16</sup> Particularly relevant to Canberra's contemporary visual arts have been the exhibitions and catalogues produced by CMAG, such as *Something in the air: collage and assemblage in Canberra region art* and *Imitation of life: memory and mimicry in Canberra region art*.<sup>17</sup>

Ideas regarding the formal beginnings of Canberra as an art centre go back to the 1940s. In 1941, Charles Bean, chair of the Australian War Memorial (AWM – opened 1943), proposed that Canberra should be developed as a cultural centre and establish its own art school. Taking up the idea in 1965, Richard 'Dick' Kingsland, secretary of the Department of the Interior, with the support of HC 'Nugget' Coombs, governor of the Reserve Bank, invited art educator Donald Brook to Canberra to discuss establishing a serious art school at Canberra Technical College.<sup>18</sup>

To that end, Brook assumed leadership of the college, which, since 1933, was housed in a series of repurposed timber and fibro huts, built in 1911 for Canberra's Royal Military College, Duntroon, and relocated to the inner south suburb of Kingston as 'temporary' accommodation.

The journey from the college's first part-time art classes in 1942, to the eventual establishment of the CSA as the sole inhabitant of its own premises in 1976, exemplifies the principal struggle that daunted Canberra's arts community until the 1990s. That is, the resourcing of and control over appropriate spaces where the *idea* of Canberra as an arts centre, and local desire to affect this, was matched with suitable physical spaces.<sup>19</sup> Despite many submissions, editorials, enquiries, committees and reports over more than 30 years, from the 1930s through to the beginning

16 Betty Churcher and Lucy Quinn, *Treasures of Canberra*, Canberra, Halstead Press, 2013.

17 Deborah Clark and Mark Van Veen (eds), *Something in the air: collage and assemblage in Canberra region art*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra, CMAG, 2010; Deborah Clark (ed), *Imitation of life: memory and mimicry in Canberra region art*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra, CMAG, 2011.

18 *Artlink's* editor Stephanie Britton described Brook, who is currently emeritus professor of art history at South Australia's Flinders University, as 'Australia's most revered art theorist', in an editor's note to Brook's essay, 'The art school way back when' (*Artlink* 31, 3, 2011, p 80). Brook was a seminal figure in the development of Australia's contemporary art spaces. In Adelaide in the mid-1970s, he spearheaded the campaign for a small gallery run on a collective basis by artists, for artists. His work led to the founding of Adelaide's Experimental Art Foundation (EAF) in 1974.

19 At the time, and until 1977, the NSW Department of Education had responsibility for technical education in the ACT with regard to full-time staffing (through the National Art School in Sydney) and curricula. The Department of the Interior, representing the Commonwealth, took responsibility for support staff, policy and the provision of buildings.

of the 1970s, technical trade students and the growing contingent of art and craft students largely continued to be housed in the entirely unsatisfactory, repurposed huts and demountables.

From the 1950s, ‘hobbyist’ art classes accounted for an increasing percentage of overall technical college enrolments, testifying to the increasing hunger for art education within the population; colloquially, those enrolled were referred to as attending the School of Arts or the School of Arts and Crafts. Through the 1960s, under full-time teacher Henri le Grand in ceramics and part-time teachers including Beverley Batt, Jan Brown, Tom Cleghorn, Lola de Mar, Lyndon Dadswell and Robin Wallace-Crabbe, enrolments and course offerings continued to increase.<sup>20</sup> By 1966 a full-time introductory art course was established, at what by now was referred to as the ‘School of Art’, Canberra Technical College.

Although Brook resigned, unhappily, less than 12 months into his tenure, his further reports on the condition of the buildings, which made them unsuitable as a post-secondary art college, and the difficulties associated with external control, assisted in increasing community determination to find new premises and to establish a standalone art school.<sup>21</sup>

In 1969, the school began transitioning to the old Canberra High School in Acton, the site of The Australian National University (ANU). Although some renovations in 1974 transformed the art deco building into a structure more suited to an art school, a \$3 million building program between 1979 and 1981 resulted in Canberra finally being able to claim a fully resourced School of Art.

In 1977, CSA was greatly expanded to be a Bauhaus-inspired group of art and craft workshops under inaugural director Udo Sellbach. From that time onwards, the school attracted lecturers and produced artists of national and international importance, becoming a central player in the development of the city’s unique arts practice.

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20 Agostino (pp 6–20) comprehensively details the period from 1942/43 to 1976, when the teaching of art was separated from technical education. Michael Agostino, *The Australian National University School of Art: a history of the first 65 years*, Canberra, ANU School of Art, 2009.

21 Brook’s employment at Canberra Technical College foundered on the obduracy of NSW Education Department officials, in spite of the overt support of Kingsland and Coombs (who was soon to be the proponent and chair of the Australian Council for the Arts and chancellor of ANU), and of students and staff at Canberra Technical College.



**Figure 1. Canberra School of Art building, circa 1980s**

Source. Australian National University Archives, photographer Julie Macklin, ANU Photographic Services, reproduced with permission

## Contemporary arts organisations

Part two of this history explores the development and activities of Bitumen River Gallery/Canberra Contemporary Art Space. Predicated on the local, the organisation displayed both local and national relevance from its inception and, in the 1990s, it developed an increasingly international outlook.

The context within which BRG evolved stemmed from meetings held in Canberra in 1980 to canvas the idea of a collective gallery. In the absence of government funding alternatives, the Commonwealth-funded, local job-creation organisation Jobless Action provided initial support for the establishment of Megalo in 1980, and then BRG 12 months later. By 1986, of Australia's six states and territories, only the ACT, where Canberra is sited, and the Northern Territory (NT) lacked a contemporary art space. Between the opening of BRG in 1981, and 1986, when the first public meeting was held seeking interest in forming a contemporary arts space in the NT's capital city, Darwin, the Visual Arts Board (VAB) of the Australia Council for the Arts (Australia Council) committed to supporting contemporary art spaces in all Australian states and territories.<sup>22</sup> During the 1986 meeting, the VAB outlined its willingness to provide 'in-principle support and potential funding'.<sup>23</sup> CCAS was then established, with some Australia Council assistance, through a merger of BRG with the Arts Council Gallery (ACG) in 1987, continuing BRG's important foundational work. By the end of the 1980s, CCAS was one of 12 contemporary art spaces in Australia that united under the national support organisation Contemporary Art Organisations Australia (CAOA). Funded by state and federal government arts bodies, they supported and presented work by living artists across a range of media. With the exception of the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia (CACSA), which opened in 1942, most of these spaces were founded in the 1970s and 1980s.

Of the CAO member organisations, seven have produced partial histories in various formats that review or examine periods in their development, including the Institute of Modern Art (IMA, Brisbane, founded 1975), Performance Space (Sydney, 1983), Contemporary Art Tasmania

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22 Malcolm McKinnon, *The hottest gallery in the world: 10 years at 24HR Art – Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art (1990–2000)*, Darwin, 24HR Art, 2001, p 6.

23 McKinnon, 2001.

(CAT, Hobart (previously Chameleon/Arthouse/NETS/CAST), 1983), Northern Centre for Contemporary Art (NCCA, Darwin (previously 24HR Art), 1989), Experimental Art Foundation (EAF, 1974), Gertrude Contemporary (Melbourne, 1985) and CACSA.<sup>24</sup> Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA (from Praxis), 1974), Artspace Visual Arts Centre (Sydney, 1983), the Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP, Melbourne, 1986) and the Australian Centre for Photography (ACP, Sydney, 1973) have no published histories, although the latter's publication, *Photofile*, first published in 1983, provides a comprehensive history of contemporary photography practice in Australia.<sup>25</sup>

While BRG began in response to particular local social, political and cultural factors, it was also in line with national developments of the 1980s regarding the exhibition and development of contemporary art. While this history does not compare BRG/CCAS with the other 11 CAO members, it is useful to compare the beginnings of Canberra's

24 For South Australia, see Stephanie Britton (ed), *A decade at the EAF: a history of the Experimental Art Foundation 1974–1984* (Adelaide, Australian Experimental Art Foundation, 1984). This publication gathers together images and recollections of exhibitions and events, and includes essays from Donald Brook that speak eloquently of the pace of change in 1970s art practice in Australia. Subsequently to this, in various years, the EAF has produced small booklets covering its exhibitions. See also Dean Bruton (ed), *The contemporary art society of South Australia 1942–86: recollections* (Adelaide, The Contemporary Art Society of South Australia, 1986). For Queensland, see Bob Lingard and Sue Cramer (eds), *Institute of Modern Art: a documentary history 1975–1989* (Brisbane, Institute of Modern Art, 1989), which documents the first 15 years of the organisation through the eyes of its directors. Former director David Brooker wrote 'Quo vadis: 1994 to 2004: the Snelling years' (Brisbane, Institute of Modern Art, 2005, [web.archive.org/web/20140306081944/http://www.ima.org.au/pages/history/1994E280932004-the-snelling-years.php](http://web.archive.org/web/20140306081944/http://www.ima.org.au/pages/history/1994E280932004-the-snelling-years.php), last captured 6 March 2014, accessed 2 August 2012). The IMA is compiling an exhibitions list that currently runs from 1975 to 2000, and includes a qualifier as to its non-completeness and accuracy. For Tasmania, see Victoria Hammond (ed), *Chameleon: a decade (1983–1993)* (Hobart, Contemporary Art Space Tasmania, 1983). This publication and exhibition considered Chameleon over its 10-year history and was produced by CAST (now CAT) following the amalgamation between Chameleon in Hobart and Arthouse in Launceston. For the Northern Territory, see McKinnon, 2001. CAST and 24HR Art (now NCCA) publications use voices from a variety of ex- and current members whose stories privilege place and whose writing is lively and compelling. For New South Wales, see *21 years of hybrid arts practice* (Sydney, Performance Space, 2004). Released to mark Performance Space's 21st birthday celebrations, this publication includes a list of works based on the organisation's incomplete archive. In addition, Mike Mullins, who founded Performance Space and devised the inaugural show *Long, long time ago (aka New blood two)* in 1983, presented his Masters thesis in the form of a two-hour video at COFA on aspects of the organisation's history. For Victoria, see Charlotte Day (ed), *A short ride in a fast machine: Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces 1985–2005* (Melbourne, Gertrude Contemporary, 2006). This 280-page, full-colour book marked the organisation's 20-year anniversary.

25 In addition to the above organisations, the George Paton Gallery at the University of Melbourne was important as the first experimental art space to be supported by an institution. From 1973–80, under the visionary direction of Kiffy Rubbo, the gallery provided a home for the Women's Art Register and the Women's Art Movement and championed women's and political art, performance and video, photography and sculpture.

contemporary arts space with Darwin's NCCA and Hobart's CAT. This is because of important similarities, despite the emergence of these three groups over a decade, and the vast differences between the three cities in which they are located.

The ACT, Tasmania and the NT are home to Australia's smallest populations. The NT has the nation's highest non-urban population of Aboriginal people. Both the NT and Tasmania are geographically isolated from major Australian cities, while the ACT covers the smallest geographical area. Of the three capital cities, Darwin, which is geographically close to Asia, is the most culturally diverse, although Canberra's cultural ecology benefits from more than 80 international embassies based in the city. The ACT and the NT face similar arts funding challenges as a result of restricted legislative agency. Of course, Tasmania, the ACT and the NT are separated by thousands of kilometres and, despite similarities in population numbers, are vastly different in make-up. Yet the published histories of both NCCA and CAT highlight key concerns shared by arts communities in Canberra, Darwin and Hobart<sup>26</sup> at a time when none of these cities offered art school graduates or emerging artists continuing exhibition opportunities outside the art school paradigm. Artists in all three locations were therefore compelled to create their own galleries.

Inaugural BRG coordinator Alison Alder reflected on the need for a gallery to promote the work of local artists in a national forum in 1983:

The Art School was the pivot of art activity which was closed to artists outside of that system. There were no collective studios, although a number of people had tried to set up artists' studios which had failed, mainly, I think, because of the small number of graduates remaining in Canberra and also from the lack of space due to the artificial nature of the city.<sup>27</sup>

Alder's comments about the founding of BRG to support local Canberra artists with opportunities to develop their practice and further their careers is echoed in statements by the founders of spaces in Tasmania and the NT. Bo Jones, founding member of Chameleon in Hobart, recalled that 'the Art School wore the responsibility for the whole visual art scene'.<sup>28</sup> Once the idea for a local contemporary artist-run collective was established in

26 McKinnon, 2001; Hammond, 1983.

27 Alison Alder, 'Serving the needs of artists', conference paper, *Open sandwich conference*, ANZART, Hobart, May 1983.

28 Jones, quoted in Hammond, 1983, p 8.

Hobart, 'the idea took off like wildfire'.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the inaugural director of 24HR Art, Chris Downie, remembered the period directly prior to its establishment in 1989: 'There's been nowhere for graduates from art school to go, most of them leave the Territory the minute they graduate.'<sup>30</sup>

Similarities can also be found in the ways that the three collectives developed their exhibition spaces. All reclaimed sites, BRG occupied a derelict shelter shed attached to the grounds of a church and primary school; 24HR Art was established in a decaying petrol station earmarked for demolition; and Chameleon opened in the abandoned Blundstone boot factory. The sites of these galleries inspired their names: Alder remembers BRG as being named for the evocative sighing of the wind through the trees edging the large bitumen car park adjacent to the gallery building; 24HR Art referenced the 24-hour-a-day trading of the former Go-Lo petrol station it occupied; and Chameleon encapsulated art's ability to transform place. The buildings were reclaimed for the display of contemporary arts practice, and the names given to them reflect the 'do-it-yourself' mentality with which these organisations were formed.

Unlike other states and territories, however, the ACT is the site of the nation's capital and home to its premier art, cultural and educational institutions. These mark Canberra as national capital space. Within a small population, this has given rise to citizens who are, broadly speaking, politically and culturally literate and who extended support, in unique ways, for the growth of a local arts practice during the final two decades of the twentieth century.

## Canberra women and contemporary art

An exceptional aspect of the contemporary art community in Canberra is the profound influence exerted by women on its development. As drivers of social change in the 1970s, women were responsible for instigating much-needed social reform within Canberra's unusual population demographic that, by the 1960s, saw a majority of women and children

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29 Jones, quoted in Hammond, 1983, p 8.

30 Chris Downie, 'Eyeline Magazine, 1991', in McKinnon, 2001, p 7.

within the population.<sup>31</sup> These statistics created unique circumstances for active community engagement with women's social problems, including isolation, housing, domestic violence and public safety issues. Women's political activism went hand-in-hand with international and national social and political movements, including women's liberation, opposition to the Vietnam War, the countercultural movement, the fight for Indigenous rights and the campaign for nuclear disarmament. This led to poster making that was practised largely, though not exclusively, by women as an instrument to champion social change and cohesion, shaping the beginnings of a local contemporary arts practice.

Poster making was an ideal tool for communication and agitation. While the printing process was physically arduous, the production process was cheap and accessible. It was, therefore, an ideal collective endeavour. Its ability to be rapidly deployed throughout an urban environment made it unparalleled as a public message machine.

The influence of women in the history of Canberra's arts is usefully illustrated by a statistical anomaly: BRG/CCAS is distinguished as the only contemporary art space in Australia that has continuously exhibited a higher percentage of female artists than male. This was revealed by a compilation statistics of exhibitors at BRG/CCAS from 1981 to 2012 in preparation for the exhibition *Bad girls: twenty witness 1000*, which I curated in February 2013.<sup>32</sup> The exhibition comprised 28 artworks from 20 female artists who had exhibited at BRG/CCAS from April 1981 to December 2012 and reflected the tremendous diversity of ideas addressed over the period and the local, national and global frames of reference in which the artists couched their practice (see Figure 2). The artists in the exhibition were representative of the more than 1,000 women who had shown at the gallery over the preceding 32 years. For a relatively small regional contemporary art space, this is an extraordinary record.

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31 In 1961, in a total population of 58,856, there were 10,885 women aged from 20–44 and 20,651 children under 14 years old. By 1966, in a total population of 96,013, there were 22,206 women between 20–44 and 31,708 children under 14 years old. Except where otherwise footnoted, all population data throughout this study is extrapolated from Table 2.17 Population (a) (b), age and sex, ACT (b), 30 June, 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia Historical Population Statistics (cat no 3105.0.65.001), 2014).

32 *Bad girls: twenty witness 1000*. Curator: Anni Doyle Wawrzyńczak. Artists: Alison Alder, Jane Barney, Vivienne Binns, Rachel Bowak, Jacqueline Bradley, Julie Bradley, Julia Church, Fiona Davies, eX de Medici, Mariana del Castillo, Anna Eggert, Cherylynn Holmes, Catriona Holyoake, Stephanie Jones, Deborah Kelly, Mandy Martin, Brenda Runnegar, Bronwen Sandland, Erica Secombe, Ruth Waller. CCAS, 8 February – 16 March 2013.



**Figure 2. Group exhibition, *Bad girls: twenty witness 1000*, 8 February – 16 March 2013. Installation photograph, detail**

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

This is borne out by recent research by artist and academic Elvis Richardson who since 2008, under the pseudonym ‘the CoUNTess’, has been recording gender bias in the art world.<sup>33</sup> Her research confirms that the number of enrolled female students is significantly higher than that of male students in all art schools, including CSA/ANU School of Art (ANU SOA).<sup>34</sup> An examination of graduating student lists from CSA since 1977 confirms that this statistic holds true across all years.<sup>35</sup> With a national and occasionally international focus, Richardson has compared graduating numbers with women artists represented in exhibitions. For 2011 she compiled statistics from the six state CAO member organisations and the NT, with the exception of CCAS.<sup>36</sup> In contrast to art school enrolment statistics, Richardson’s data reveals a significantly

33 CoUNTess, [countesses.blogspot.com.au](http://countesses.blogspot.com.au), accessed 12 January 2013.

34 ‘Educating and exhibiting artists’, *CoUNTess*, 2 December 2012, [countesses.blogspot.ca/2012/12/educating-and-exhibiting-artists.html](http://countesses.blogspot.ca/2012/12/educating-and-exhibiting-artists.html), accessed 12 January 2013.

35 ‘Appendix J: Graduates 1978–2008’, in Agostino, 2009, pp 237–53.

36 *CoUNTess*, 2 December 2012. CCAS exhibition data is not represented in these figures as the CCAS website was inaccessible during the period that 2011 figures were being compiled (CoUNTess [Elvis Richardson], email to the author, 21 February 2013).

higher number of male exhibitors across the country. Only 24HR Art during 2011 exhibited more female artists,<sup>37</sup> with these higher figures accounted for by the prevalence of Indigenous women exhibiting.<sup>38</sup>

That more female artists have exhibited at BRG/CCAS might be explained by the leading role of women in its administration. Indeed, of the eight coordinators/directors over 32 years, six have been women.<sup>39</sup> In the main, men hold directorial positions at art galleries, including at contemporary art spaces. Of the two male directors of BRG/CCAS, however, Trevor Smith was joined in his second and final year by Jane Barney in the role of curator. Nevertheless, incumbent director David Broker's tenure since 2006 has also been characterised annually by a greater proportion of female to male exhibitors, which suggests other important factors at work. In short, women artists, lecturers and gallerists played an unusually dominant role in the founding of the contemporary arts community in Canberra. This can be seen in the influence of female print and poster makers; the example of women artists/lecturers at Canberra School of Art (CSA); the presence of Helen Maxwell's *australian*<sup>40</sup> Girls Own Gallery (aGOG 1989–2000); and Canberra's position as a political fulcrum for concerns impacting on women.

## The global and the local

The growth of international biennales and triennials over the last two decades is evidence of an increasingly globalised art world. A commensurate flattening of discourse across international boundaries has cast an opaque film around the representation and value of local

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37 *CoUNTess*, 2 December 2012. In four of the eight years from 2005–12, 24HR Art showed more female than male artists, with 14 more female artists showing overall for the period (24HR Art, email to the author, 26 February 2013).

38 The NT has the highest concentration of Indigenous Australians and, therefore, the greatest number of Indigenous artists. The largest number of Indigenous artists are women. If the anomaly was due, say, to a smaller population base, then CAST in Hobart would also be expected to reflect a greater number of female exhibitors, whereas its greater ratio of male exhibitors is in keeping with national and international trends.

39 Alison Alder, Anne Virgo, Erica Green, Brenda Runnegar, Jane Barney and Lisa Byrne.

40 Note that 'australian' is rendered all in lowercase. In using the lower case 'a', Maxwell was overtly choosing to foreground the women artists she was representing. It was, in a way, a diminution of the importance of the word 'National', considered in this case to be somewhat patriarchal.

practices.<sup>41</sup> The production of local histories of art provides an important antidote to this. Australian art historian Terry Smith, who gave one of the first public lectures at BRG in 1984, in 2010 called for:

a variety of kinds of critical practice, each of them alert to the demands, limits and potentialities of both local worlds and distant worlds, as well as actual and possible connections between locality and distance. In practice, translocality amounts to a focus on local artistic manifestations, and on actual existing connections between them and art and ideas elsewhere.<sup>42</sup>

This study answers Smith's call with a deeply local history, rife with paradox and rich in narrative; an inspiring story of local endeavour pitted against national imperatives. It is, in many ways, a David and Goliath story that, until the handover to self-government was completed in 1992, saw emerging local expressions of art and culture struggle against the Commonwealth's implementation of its national cultural agenda. This dichotomy, between the local and the national, lay at the heart of the immense difficulties surrounding the early understanding and funding of a local practice that manifested broadly through community, amateur and professional practitioners, firstly in the performing arts and then in the visual arts. Despite this essential locality, Canberra's position as national capital meant that the ideas that influenced the community assumed national and international importance, ensuring that the development of practice was not parochial and was evidentially informed by international and national viewpoints – translocality in practice.

## How local art made Australia's national capital

This history comprises two parts. Beginning in the 1920s, it traces the origins of what has proven to be an exceptionally active and unique local arts community. The first part reveals and analyses the defining factors, and their complex intersections over the twentieth century, that led to this. The second part tracks the development of contemporary visual

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41 For example: *55th Venice biennale 2013*, 'Universes in universe – worlds of art'; *56th Venice biennale 2015*, 'All the world's futures'; *20th biennale of Sydney 2016*, 'The future is already here: it's just not evenly distributed'; *Sharjah biennial 12*, 2015, 'The past, the present, the possible'; *10th Taipei biennial 2016*, 'Gestures and archives of the present, genealogies of the future'.

42 Terry Smith, 'The state of art history: contemporary art', *The Art Bulletin*, December 2010, p 380.

arts practice from 1978 to 2000 through the case study of BRG/CCAS. It investigates the changing roles and impacts of coordinators/directors Alison Alder, Anne Virgo, Trevor Smith and Jane Barney, and it also examines the role and impact of other key players, especially the CSA Print Workshop's first tutor – artist Mandy Martin – and Canberra artist eX de Medici. Martin's journey to Canberra encapsulates the political/artistic focus that inspired the founding members of BRG. De Medici's career exemplifies the trajectory from local to international focus that charted the maturing of Canberra's contemporary arts community.

Chapter 1 examines the years from the 1920s to 1978 and the events and proclivities that laid the groundwork for the emergence of contemporary visual arts practice from 1978. It examines Canberra's unique sociopolitical duality as federal/national capital and as the site of a burgeoning regional/local community, the background to and rise of women as agents of social change, the trajectory and impacts of federal arts funding nationally and locally, the growth of commercial galleries and other exhibition spaces, and the historic and physical make-up of Canberra's suburbs.

Chapter 2 continues this broad exploration of the city's wider arts and cultural manifestations. It proposes the 1980s as the decade of the genesis of local contemporary visual arts practice and examines formative issues of the 1980s that influenced its development. With the ACT under the control of the Commonwealth, and local government therefore hampered by restricted legislative agency, the chapter reveals unique local solutions to rapidly growing needs in the broad arts sector. These included a lack of studio and exhibition spaces for visual artists, a continued unsuccessful focus on funding performing arts as flagship companies, and inadequate funding and forward planning for the entire arts sector. The chapter is anchored by a close reading of the 1985 Pascoe Report into arts funding in the ACT. This report, which considered local arts as an expression of national capital space culture, was entirely at odds with the growing needs and desires of local arts and culture practitioners. In response to the report's delivery, the chapter charts the robust community reactions that assisted in alerting the incoming, self-governing ACT Legislative Assembly to the power and relevance of local contemporary arts.

Chapter 3, in considering the 1990s, examines the path to self-government and the impacts of successive local governments on arts development during the decade. The 1990s saw a powerful confluence of local support mechanisms delivered via an intelligent, bipartisan approach to arts and

cultural development and funding. Although national public and federal government perceptions remained bound up with Canberra's position as national capital space and a federal power base, in the 1990s local arts and culture conclusively claimed its own space. Nowhere was this more evident than in the visual arts. An analysis of two major committees established by the ACT Legislative Assembly, which enabled rapid sector-wide growth, reveals an unprecedented depth of government engagement with the arts community.

Beginning part two of this history, Chapters 4 and 5 continue the examination of Canberra's unique social/political duality, focusing on the case study of BRG/CCAS. Chapter 4 begins in 1978 with an investigation of the factors leading up to BRG's founding, and concludes at the end of 1983 with Virgo's arrival at BRG as co-coordinator. Chapter 5 examines the process and impacts of BRG's amalgamation with the ACG to form CCAS in 1987. Together, the chapters reveal that the process from unfunded collective to fully funded contemporary art space was marked by circumstances unique to Canberra. The chapters examine the impact of these circumstances on the growth of contemporary art practice, as tracked by several case studies of groups and individuals. These trace the growing maturity of Canberra as an art centre, from the youthful dynamism that characterised BRG to the progressing of national relationships and capacity-building through CCAS.

The history concludes in Chapter 6 with a focused investigation of expressions of arts practice through BRG/CCAS. It analyses the gallery's history under the two directors, Smith and Barney, who steered the organisation through the 1990s. The chapter charts the paradigmatic changes in the roles of curators and directors during this decade, and examines the gallery's declining preoccupation with the local. This is followed by an examination of minorities in exhibition through the 1980s and 1990s and a comparative analysis of travelling exhibitions mounted during these decades. A close reading of exhibitions, including *Satellite of love* (Dale Frank), curated by Smith and Christopher Chapman, and exhibitions curated by Barney including *Beautiful home* (Bronwen Sandland and Paull McKee), *60 heads* (eX de Medici), *Canberra/Brasilia* and *Black books*, reveal the narrative arc that moved the organisation from its earlier preoccupation with establishing a local space to a mature engagement with international themes and markets. The chapter as a whole places CCAS within its national and international contexts through examinations of personnel, exhibitions and artists.

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