

*Come on baby light my fire:*

‘Ignite’ curatorial workshops and public forum

Darwin - 19, 20 & 21 October 2002

With the change of weather in the Top End of the Northern Territory, from the balmy days and cool evenings of the Dry Season tropics, to the hot and humid oppressiveness of the Build-Up’s ‘mango madness’ season, Darwin’s contemporary art space, 24HRArt, decided to turn up the heat with *Ignite*, a series of weekend intensive curatorial workshops held at the Northern Territory University (19 and 20 October 2002). Six guest speakers presented a series of talks, chaired ‘practical workshops’ and initiated often animated discussion sessions on the roles and responsibilities of institutionally based and free-lance curators – in public museums and art galleries, contemporary art and temporary exhibition spaces – whether in a local, national or international context. This was followed by a public forum on 21 October, held at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), entitled ‘Whose Show Is This Anyway?’, where a number of the speakers discussed key issues raised over the *Ignite* weekend, successfully re-kindling debate for an extended audience, and providing further confirmation of both the local demand and long-term benefits of programs of this kind.

A range of interrelated themes emerged from *Ignite*, and several contentious matters were freely debated, in particular, the role of curator as ‘cultural broker’<sup>1</sup> between the artist, the audience and art; and Indigenous collections and curatorship. The key themes included:

- THE CURATOR – as caretaker or ‘gatekeeper’ of a permanent collection or a ‘culture’, exhibition impresario, researcher, publisher, artist, political/social activist or ‘cultural shaper’;
- THE SPACE – differences and tensions between the ‘traditional’ museum and art gallery as an exhibition venue, the contemporary art space and travelling exhibitions in a range of venues and geographical contexts;
- THE EXHIBITION MEDIUM – its possibilities and limitations within the context of a permanent collection, in a contemporary art space, in public spaces not ordinarily concerned with art, and in the international arena of biennials and triennials;
- INDIGENOUS COLLECTIONS & INDIGENOUS CURATORS – the institutional legacy of colonial patterns of collecting: ‘remedial’ collection management of Indigenous human remains and material culture items; ‘exhibiting cultures’ rather than disembodied art objects; the Indigenous curator as radical re-interpreter of Indigenous art held in public and private collections; whether cross-cultural research and publication has succeeded in bridging the divide between art history and anthropology in the display of indigenous art and material culture;

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<sup>1</sup> A term coined by Philip Jones, in relation to anthropologists as an ‘elite of cultural brokers’: Jones (1997: 131).

- MUSEUMS & MASTERPIECES – whether a distinction can be made between the politics of ‘taste’ and connoisseurship and the exercise of ‘aesthetic judgment’ in curatorial collection and exhibition.

*Alasdair Foster*<sup>2</sup>, Director of the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, sparked off the weekend workshops with a stimulating address which, he later conceded at the public forum, provocatively counterpoised the collection-bound museum/art gallery curator, and the contemporary art space curator.

Freed from the perceived constraints of collection-based practice, the contemporary art space curator was cast primarily, but not exclusively, as exhibition organiser *par excellence* – a role whose radical social possibilities are best ‘exposed’, and most clearly ‘in focus’, in the relatively recent contemporary art category of photography. Foster contrasted museums, originally the historical ‘treasure houses’ of the nineteenth century, and their curators (‘high priests’ of good taste and connoisseurship), with the contemporary phenomenon of *kunsthalls* and rotating exhibition spaces, free of the curatorial burden of interpreting permanent collections of ‘fine art’ and identifying ‘masterpieces’ – both legacies of an exclusionary, elitist and undemocratic museological past.

Quoting Picasso (‘Good taste is the enemy of creativity’), Foster noted that the primary role of the contemporary art space curator was to make art accessible ‘to the people’ in as open and empowering way as possible. The

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<sup>2</sup> Before moving to Australia, Foster was founding Director of *Fotofeis*, the award winning biennial of international photography in Scotland. He curated the highly acclaimed *Photographica Australis* exhibition at ARCO 2002 in Madrid, and was one of ten curators chosen worldwide to select the 100 photographers featured in *Blink* (Phaidon 2002), a major publication on photographic art.

closed religious space of the museum denies access to all but the privileged initiate with finely tuned sensibilities, a space within which art becomes 'a commodity of the rich' or the 'plaything of intellectuals'. By contrast, the contemporary art space or exhibition provides a polar opposite – an arena of democratic cultural engagement, where the appreciation and enjoyment of art becomes 'a birth right', and a matter of 'public health'. The rally cry is anti-Modernist, anti-aesthetics-as-connoisseurship, a call to arms against the implied political power structure of the white cube – an art revolutionary *Marseillaise* – or is it? It would have been good I think, to have heard from a curator 'as high priest' at this stage of the workshop, to find out how the 'museum as treasure house' has evolved over the last few decades, how it relates contemporary art practices to its permanent collections, and whether the notion of collection as cultural legacy is still a viable one. *Daena Murray* (Curator, Visual Arts, MAGNT), did not speak from the podium until the public forum, when she noted that Foster's 'demystification' of the curatorial role, in a range of contexts, 'set the tone for the workshops'. As the weekend sessions unfolded, Foster's opening presentation acquired the hallmarks of a keynote address.

While Foster emphasised that curatorship was by no means a fixed or even a particularly established concept, he highlighted what he considered to be its four key features: to interpret for, deliver to and develop audiences, and to develop the relationship between the *artist* and the *audience* (in contrast to the characteristically Modernist ambition of creating a rapport between the *art work* and the *audience*). How the rapprochement between 'artist and audience' may

successfully be achieved where an artist is deceased, was not raised or considered at discussion time. He also identified several 'dangers' inherent in contemporary art curatorship, and these could well be applied to the museum and art gallery context too: the temptation to exhibit work without reference to historical antecedents, the power curators have to affect artists' careers adversely, and the curatorial emphasis on 'themes' which potentially override appreciation of the art work itself. That being a curator can sometimes mean being in a 'dangerous place' was reiterated at the public forum, where he used the metaphor of a 'two-way street' to describe the environment within which curatorial practice occurs, one in which the curator (as traffic-controller?), must negotiate between the dual carriageways of artists and audiences, so that neither dominate (or run each other down?).

In describing the nature of visual art, Foster noted that it might not always be 'finished', 'inspired' or 'closed' in nature – to present art this way may potentially alienate audiences. At the same time, an art work's potential 'strangeness' is something curators need to bridge. He commended the advice of the current Director of the MCA, Sydney (Elizabeth Ann McGregor), who has advocated that the key questions audiences want answered in an exhibition space are 'who made it and why?', not 'what does it mean?'. Although it was not raised at the time, this distinction, perhaps more than any other, characterises the conceptual divide that can occur between art historical and anthropological approaches to curating Indigenous art. Whilst it is erroneous to assume that art history is not, or never has been, concerned with issues of iconography and iconology or cultural

context, and that the only concept of aesthetic appreciation of Indigenous art open to art historians is confined to the tenets of Modernism, both assumptions continue to resurface in publications calling for a 'cross-cultural' approach to curatorship: Morphy (2001: 37-50). While contemporary artists (Indigenous or other) may be happy with the 'who made it and why' formula for curating exhibitions, in many instances, it is not possible, for a range of reasons, to ascertain what artists (in particular Indigenous artists from a traditional community context) may prefer – only what, in many instances, anthropologists *tell us* they prefer.

The medium of photography – its ubiquity, availability to all, its concern for the everyday and for social commentary – has without a doubt posed a significant challenge to traditional museum spaces, collections, the criteria for institutional collecting and associated notions of curatorship. Photographic art does, for the most part, look uncomfortable and constrained in art galleries and museums, where the glossy catalogues and post cards of the gallery/museum shop are often the first 'exposure' to reproduced images the public has after crossing the threshold of the institution's entrance. Perhaps Malraux's 'museum without walls' is more comprehensible today than it was in the 1950s. Perhaps also museums and art galleries are much better at telling us where we have been, rather than where we are heading. But this does not mean that a fruitful dialectic cannot (and does not) occur between the two spaces and activities of 'museum with permanent collection' and 'contemporary art space with associated

travelling exhibitions'.<sup>3</sup> In general, public recognition of an artist's work through exhibition goes hand-in-hand with the need for artists to make a living; whether either or both is achieved as a result of a transcendental experience in a museum, or the maelstrom of international biennales, may not matter much in the short-term. The important thing is that both the public and artists' work are brought together in the most conducive environment, whatever and wherever that may be.

In defining the relationship between the curator as exhibition organiser, the artist and audience, Foster described the curator as less a high priest, and more like an 'editor', a 'sounding board' or an 'interlocutor'. All three descriptions are potentially intrusive (in a positive or negative way) – from an artist's perspective, or an audience's. Significantly, he called for curatorial 'modesty', and borrowing a cross-cultural metaphor, advocated that in art, at least, there should be no 'holy cows'. But whilst his suggestions have much to commend them, in the final analysis, someone must still run the show – whether it be the ringmaster with whip and chair, or high priest with incense and candles, or revolutionary with flag and manifesto. While the experience of an exhibition space may be democratic or egalitarian, and its exhibits aimed at reaching or touching the widest audience possible, choices still have to be made – whose work to display, how to display it and where. This should not be a question of taste (what curators happen to like or not like), but aesthetic judgment in the broadest possible sense of the word –

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<sup>3</sup> Murray noted at the public forum that with her appointment to MAGNT in 1993, the title 'Curator, Fine Arts' was changed to 'Curator, Visual Arts', marking a broadening of her role to include the collection and exhibition of contemporary art, evidenced in the *Contemporary Territory* biennial/triennial.

of perception, experience, intelligence and most importantly, feeling. It should not be forgotten that the opposite of 'aesthetic' is 'anaesthetic' – a numbing of all sensory perception, and that the word 'curator' entails not only the 'care' of collections, but may draw on the lesser known meaning of the Latin *curare*, to cure. Whether curators choose to cure art, or artists, or audiences, or the political and social ills of the world, is entirely up to them. Perhaps the old adage, 'Physician, cure thyself' is something they could bear in mind when going about their business. 'Curator, cure thyself' provides an inbuilt, occupational 'reality check' on curatorial excess in the exhibition space, and curatorial gate-keeping in the storage facility. We may well have a 'birth right' to engage with art, but in exhibition spaces and museums, the public has a democratic right to vote with its feet. By all means, get us in through the door – the more the merrier. But the real curatorial challenge, ultimately, is to keep us coming back.

Following Alasdair Foster, *Daniel Palmer*<sup>4</sup>, Project Coordinator at the Centre for Contemporary Photography and curator of its e-Media Gallery, presented an informal talk on the hybrid, interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary practices of 'new media' art, including electronic and digital art. From computer screen to cyberspace, it would seem, the definitions and creative possibilities of an 'exhibition space', a 'curator' and an 'art work' are virtually limitless. In a range of projects spanning diverse venues across the country, Palmer discussed how

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<sup>4</sup> Palmer ([www.danielpalmer.com](http://www.danielpalmer.com)) is a Melbourne-based writer, curator and teacher. He lectures on the history and theory of photography at Monash University and the Photography Studies College, and is a tutor at the Centre for Ideas Program at the Victorian College of the Arts. He has published on contemporary art in Australian and international journals, including *Photofile*, *Real Time* and *Frieze*.

digital and computer-generated art forms requiring minimal installation and display area, have created a 'gallery space' (usually a modest desk, chair and computer screen with key board) which operates as a 'distribution method' and a 'cultural interface'. Palmer commented on the tendency of 'new media' art's 'techno-formalist' (aesthetic?) concerns to be overly self-reflective at times, but that ultimately, the ideas and concepts it conveyed were more important than its methods. He noted that the MCA Sydney's *Burning the Interface* exhibition in 1996 brought digital art (in the form of PCs) into the public art museum and the contemporary art scene – a latter day example of the perennial exchange between the establishment and the *avant garde* which entails the inevitable confirmation that 'cutting edge' art has achieved legitimate status as 'new art' form.

Even more radical in its approach to the museum 'art object' than photography, it is perhaps in the creative endeavours of new media that Malraux's 'museum without walls' reaches its apotheosis. The incorporation of scanned images of archival photographs in new media installations, hauntingly deployed by artists such as Ross Gibson, is a case in point. Palmer showed Gibson's 'Darkness Loiters' during his talk. In this series, Gibson juxtaposes a selection of police photographs of probable crime scenes in various locations, framed as a group within a screen projection, which acts as a 'virtual' album. Images originally captured through the photographic lens fade in and out, like the digitised shuffle of cards in a computer game of solitaire. In this environment, the unknown police photographer's forensic gaze draws us back in time to scenes of

human culpability and significant happenings, places that have a strange aesthetic attraction all of their own. In other new media phenomena, such as web-cam 'art', the conceptual separation between art and life has become so attenuated that what was once perceived as the realism of art, and the reality of human existence, become meaningful only in reproduction. Where these new 'art forms' will lead us (or have taken us) is anyone's guess – perhaps only a computer program can provide an answer.

The last speaker on the first day, and those on the second day of the workshops, covered three diverse but potentially intersecting fields of curatorship – Indigenous curators and Indigenous collections, a Filipino perspective on curatorship and artistic practice, and the Asia-Pacific Triennial in the context of the historical 'phenomenon' of international biennial and triennial exhibitions of contemporary art.

*Franchesca Cubillo*<sup>5</sup>, one of a growing number of Indigenous anthropologists working in the museum environment or in academia across Australia, spoke with considerable experience of the challenges involved in 'exhibiting cultures', as opposed to exhibiting Indigenous art and material culture as disembodied objects – in her words, for Indigenous curators, the job was 'same, but different'. She stated that museum curators must 'follow cultures' (including artists), and that because Aboriginal art exists within cultural practice, such as ritual or performance, contextual interpretation was paramount. From her perspective, collections of Indigenous art and material culture are 'alive', resonant with past

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<sup>5</sup> Acting Program Director in the Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

histories and enduring connections to present-day communities and individuals. Whilst collections inevitably grow and diversify in the course of a museum's history, they also detract in size with the de-accessioning of contentious 'items' such as human remains and the repatriation of sacred-secret objects. It is in this field that the Indigenous curator performs a remedial role between individuals and families, and the institutional 'treasure house' – a museological act of reconciliation and a re-empowerment of Indigenous peoples which, in many instances, is long overdue.

And yet many 'non-contentious' objects in museums are also evidence of colonial practices of collection and contact history – the manner in which these are displayed can potentially give rise to conflicting curatorial approaches, where an Indigenous curator's priorities may differ from those of a non-Indigenous one. Cubillo referred to a comment made regarding the South Australian Museum's displays as 'stuffed animals with stuffed cultures' – a somewhat harsh criticism, given the obvious attempt made by that institution to link historical patterns of colonial collecting, Indigenous accommodation as well as resistance to such colonial activities<sup>6</sup>, and connections with present-day Indigenous communities.

Referring to Museums Australia's *Previous Possessions, New Obligations – Policies for Museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Cubillo noted that the right to Indigenous self-determination, in relation to material identified as 'Indigenous cultural heritage', has received official

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher Anderson, formerly Director of the South Australian Museum, has been quoted on several occasions as referring to contact history being about more than simply 'victims and thieves'.

support by Australian museums' national body, as a matter of both principle and policy. Following on from this, it was submitted that 'different protocols' should apply to the collection, exhibition and interpretation of Indigenous art as opposed to Western art. Those museums and art galleries with Indigenous collections 'embedded' within their collections of Australian art, lacking a clear administrative division between the two, and not employing an Indigenous curator, were considered to be out of step with current national policy. But what if appropriate protocols are in place, and are assiduously applied by a *non-Indigenous* curator? What if the Indigenous curator is not an anthropologist, and believes that Aboriginal art can and should be exhibited alongside Western art – on its own terms, rather than as an example of collective cultural production? Workshop participants' initial reluctance to discuss these issues was scotched by Cubillo's call to speak freely and candidly – later commended by Alasdair Foster at the public forum as the 'high point' of the weekend. Whilst the resultant debate produced no 'answers', as such, to these and other vexed questions facing curators of Indigenous collections across the country, it was acknowledged that this was an area which required balance, plain-speaking and thoughtful negotiation.

The ebullient and energetic *Rhana Devenport*<sup>7</sup>, Senior Project Officer, Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) held at the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG), offered five key features and 'tips' for curating:

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<sup>7</sup>Devenport has been involved with the Triennial since its inception (1993), providing curatorial services, publications, promotion and public program work. She frequently contributes to art

- 1.URGENCY – work on a project that needs to be done; a good starting point is to look at a range of artists' work, and take it from there;
- 2.PERSUASION – you need to be able to argue a strong case for why an exhibition needs to be mounted;
- 3.RESEARCH – this involves looking and listening, not only reading and writing;
- 4.'COOKING' – that is, teamwork (although 'curating by stealth' can also work on a small scale);
- 5.CONNECTION – after an exhibition opens, it is important to ensure that the nexus between artist-art work-audience is 'happening' (also known as 'the vibe'), and after a show comes down, its life-span can be extended by use of a web-site.

Devenport also provided a useful overview of the history (an 'epidemic') of biennials and triennials world-wide, beginning with the Venice Biennale (1895) and concluding with the Asia Pacific Triennial at QAG (1993-2002). Prefacing this part of her presentation with the question 'Big shows, why bother?', she described several models (sometimes overlapping) which characterise the international exhibition circuit: the 'Olympic model' where a large number of nations are invited to participate (Venice Biennale, Sao Paulo), the 'slippery model' (Documenta, Manifesta), the 'regional (geographically based) model' (APT, Fukuoka, Taipei) and the geo-ideological model (Havana). She specifically referred to the Lyons Biennale 2000, entitled 'Shared Exoticism', and its

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journals and serves on advisory committees for *Asialink*, *Object* and the *Asian Archive*, Hong Kong.

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curatorial agenda (the alleged 'triumph' of anthropology over Western aesthetics), reflected in a maze of intersecting ethnographic or anthropological pathways to a range of exhibits of 'tribal' art.

Beginning with the curatorial theme 'from conservation to confrontation' in 1993, the APT was characterised as a long-term project, a 'meeting of the tribal and contemporary' in which 'consultation and collaboration' with Asia Pacific artists was a big factor. Bringing artists from this region to Australia, and providing audience education were also key features. While generous funding was provided from the Queensland Government for the triennial, financial contribution was not asked or expected from participating Asian-Pacific countries. The vast selection of work exhibited at QAG (not a 'neutral' space') was geared to providing as comprehensive an overview of contemporary art produced in the region as possible. Performance art (for example, Dadang Christanto) was a big element of each triennial, with audience participation (including children's programs) encouraged as much as possible.

A special feature of the workshops was the participation of Philippines-based *Norberto Roldan*, artist and graphic designer, director/curator for Green Papaya Art Projects and a student at the University of the Philippines. His talk on the nature of his work, and the breadth of his practice in a range of individual and collective artistic/political projects, provided a personal insight into the moral and social concerns of contemporary Filipino artists. The ideological basis for much of this work is inextricably linked to the impact, on an individual and community level, of contemporary political events on Filipino life and culture. As Devenport

noted at the public forum, for many Filipino artists, art is part of the 'struggle for survival'. As such, its message is as much about 'colonial critique' as it is about art's ability to locate the 'paths to healing'.

With extensive experience in organising political, artistic and curatorial projects such as the 'Black Artists in Asia' group (which he founded in 1986), the VIVA EXCON Biennial (the first and longest running regional artists' conference in the Philippines), and a number of artists' exhibitions in Makati City, Roldan has also held his own solo exhibitions and group shows in Manila and in Australia, including at Artspace in Sydney. He discussed his 'RX: Critical Remedies' exhibition held at the Lopéz Museum, Manila (2001), which integrated Christian and folk-religious objects in a series of installations – an artistic interpretation of syncretic faith in contemporary Filipino society. He referred to the 'rituals attendant' to the struggle for survival, of which art-making as 'magic' plays a crucial role. Within the museum exhibition space, Roldan's installations ('private altars') take on the appearance of ethnographic displays, where traditional items of folk material culture are also united with 'artefacts of mass culture' – powerful metaphors for enduring cultural practices which offer remedial possibilities.

Robert Rauschenberg's concern to work 'within the space between art and life' is, in Roldan's artistic and curatorial practice, given renewed regional vigour.

Based in Darwin, Larrakia anthropologist, artist, writer and free-lance curator, Gary Lee<sup>8</sup>, concluded the curatorial workshops with an informal discussion on his

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<sup>8</sup> Lee's recent curatorial/publication projects include *Art from the Western Desert* and *The Image Black: Photography from Aboriginal Australia*, two international touring exhibitions in 1994 for DFAT, *Arañjara: Art of the First Australians* (co-editor and author), Dusseldorf and Sydney, 1996, **Come on baby light my fire: 'Ignite' curatorial workshops and public forum, by Anita Angel** © *Open Museum Journal Vol 6: New Museum Developments and the Culture Wars, September 2003*

experiences co-curating 'Love Magic: Erotics, Politics and Indigenous Art' (with Maurice O'Riordan) for Perspecta in Sydney (1999), coordinated by the AGNSW. As an independent Indigenous curator, Lee positioned himself 'on the margins' of the 'white constructs' of museum, art gallery and curatorship. Echoing Cubillo's sentiments, he emphasised the importance of 'indigenising' institutions and curatorial practices, such that indispensable Indigenous perspectives on the interpretation of Indigenous art are included.

There is no doubt that 'Love Magic', held at the National Trust's SH Ervin Gallery, provided audiences with a powerfully provocative exhibition – both in its unabashed approach to Aboriginal erotic subject matter as 'art', and as a thing of unique 'beauty'. Uninhibited by the usual anthropological concerns for the 'secrecy' of 'fieldwork' conducted in the past on Aboriginal sexual customs, this exhibition demonstrated how, in the hands of an Indigenous curator with anthropological training, and a sensibility for art that may be regarded as 'controversial', curatorship can be both empowering and subversive. There have been few, if any, exhibitions which have dealt with a range of Aboriginal pictorial imagery of this nature with such candour and empathy. References to the beauty and erotic quality of certain aspects of Aboriginal art (whether figurative or symbolic), have been rarely articulated with such explicit confidence by non-Indigenous curators or historians, particularly those whose training does not include anthropology. As Lee has noted in a published article on the exhibition,

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and in 2002, *Dirula*, the first exhibition survey of contemporary Larrakia art, for 24HRArt. He has published widely in a range of journals, books, exhibition catalogues and conference presentations, and is currently preparing the first exhibition of his own photographic male portraits.

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The *Love Magic* artists present sexual, cultural, social and political statements which, as self-representations, are personal interventions in the ongoing history of non-Indigenous representations occurring in all areas of the Aboriginal arts: Lee (2000: 62).

One aspect of 'Love Magic' which raised a topical issue, particularly for institutionally based curators (Indigenous or other) who are also practising artists, was the potential conflict which may arise when deciding whether to include one's own work in a survey exhibition, or referring to it in official publications or art journals. Are curatorial responsibilities compromised if the actual or perceived promotion of one's artistic practice occurs? For free-lance curators, such as Lee, the issue is one of personal principle, exercised on a case-by-case basis, but how do public museums and art galleries deal with this matter? At the public forum, Lee noted that although there is some way to go in modifying the non-Indigenous 'culture' of museums, many institutions were sympathetic and supportive of Indigenous claims to re-interpret collections and curate exhibitions from a black, rather than a white, perspective.

The *Ignite* curatorial workshops and public forum provided an opportunity for a number of important issues facing curators from diverse backgrounds and experiences to be debated in an open and frank manner – a refreshing attitude in a hot climate, something several guest speakers considered may be a special feature of Darwin itself. Both Cath Bowdler, the then Director of 24HRArt and Malcolm Smith (Assistant Director), are to be commended for their initiative and

hard work in bringing the program to fruition. Although the range of curators as guest speakers, and the issues covered, were by no means exhaustive (or intended to be)<sup>9</sup>, as Bowdler emphasised on several occasions, the program was aimed at providing a catalyst for further investigations and discussion – it was a beginning, not an end. The motivation in staging the program, and the level of audience participation, were evidence enough of the importance afforded both art and curatorship in this regional city at the ‘front door’ of the international art world and at the centre of what may be regarded as one of Australia’s most vital and environmentally inspired locations for contemporary art practice, apparent in the work of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, curators from commercial galleries of contemporary art were not represented.