

ARTBACK in front and out there

Suzanne Spinner on the rock'n'roll of Northern Territory art touring

ARTBACK is the Northern Territory chapter of NETS, the National Exhibition Touring Service dedicated to bringing contemporary art, craft and design to audiences in remote and regional areas of Australia. Two years after an extensive feasibility study was completed, ARTBACK got off the ground and out and about this year under the direction of Denise Officer who was appointed mid last year. Officer's background would seem to be ideal for the job. She studied Fine Arts in Melbourne and worked in the music industry (for eight years with Midnight Oil) as a graphic artist and designer before coming to the NT in 1990 where she was manager of The Sunrize Band, an Aboriginal band from Maningrida. Touring art

to remote communities might have its problems but they are small compared to touring bands—"Art", she says, "doesn't talk back, argue with you or get drunk and even the crates are smaller".

Officer immediately began a major review of potential bush venues. This involved liaising with community councils and art and craft centres in remote towns and Aboriginal communities to discover



ARTBACK trainee Jason Weetra at Pine Creek Museum, Northern Territory

and document any capable of adaptation into an artspace: anything from a shed in Oenpelli, a cyclone fence at the football club at Nguiu on Bathurst Island, civic halls in Tennant Creek and Jabiru, a veranda at Brunette Downs cattle station, the old health clinic at Papunya, to the purpose built exhibition spaces at Maningrida and Yirrkala Cultural Centres and in Katherine. All had to be measured, photographed and their detailed features annotated.

To date Officer has located more than thirty possible venues in fifteen communities but she adds, "None are ideal—most spaces need serious work from a good paint job, to blocking out the light, kicking out the dogs and some way of controlling the temperature and minimising dust and the incursion of wildlife and vermin".

The next stage involves installing a very basic NT wide uniform display/hanging system in as many places as possible and along with that, training people in communities to receive, install and dismantle shows. As much as people want to see and partake in travelling shows, the ground work has to be done first. Already aluminium tracking suitable for hanging two dimensional work has been installed at Jabiru, Tennant Creek, Pi Creek, Brunette Downs and Barunga, adding to existing venues in Katherine, Maningrida and Yirrkala. Once a community has a ready

venue, Officer comes and installs the first exhibition and runs a workshop to pass on exhibition handling skills to the locals so that next time the community may be able to do it all themselves.

ARTBACK is jointly funded by the Australia Council through the Visual Arts and Crafts Fund and the NT Office of the Arts and Cultural Affairs. The brief from the NT Government emphasises touring local art and craft to other parts of the Territory. VACF funding encourages product from outside being brought into the NT, and both encourage venue and exhibition development as well as training. ARTBACK has its headquarters at the Museum Art Gallery of the NT (MAGNT) in Darwin, which means there is additional curatorial and exhibitions expertise on site. Although MAGNT does not directly fund it, a lot of useful information and ideas are exchanged casually or can be obtained as payment for services. ARTBACK also complements the MAGNT Regional Museums program. There are obvious advantages in the cross fertilisation.

Early this year while completing the venue audit south of Alice Springs, Officer and her board chairman Steve Fox, director of 24 HR ART, created the first unofficial ARTBACK touring exhibition on the hop as it were. At Yuendumu they were told they couldn't leave without taking some art on tour, and twenty four small paintings

were put in the back of their Toyota and so *Two Doors Open* and *One Brown Box* developed—they set them up at the foot of Mt Wedge outside the Desert Oak Motel in red sand between the spinifex clumps. Later on, after they showed the Yuendumu paintings at Hermannsburg, they were offered a selection of painted clay pot lids, which were shown on the window ledge around the bar at Glen Helen Lodge to an interested audience of overseas tourists.

This was soon followed by the opening in Darwin of the first official full scale ARTBACK exhibition, *Printabout*, which comprised prints from four Aboriginal communities (Ernabella, Bathurst Island, Injalak Arts at Oenpelli, and

Warringarri Arts from the East Kimberley), printed in Darwin at the Northern Territory University's print studio.

Printabout features work by Nyukana Baker, Rover Thomas, Paddy Carlton and Ma Josette Orsto. It has already toured extensively—Pi Creek, Tennant Creek, and Jabiru—and will tour Western Australia until July 1997. It then will come home to the NT via Kuneneru to show on the Tiwi Islands and Oenpelli and then will travel south via Ernabella to Adelaide where it will be shown at the Festival Centre Artspace and various venues around the state before going on to Queensland.

Officer expects that as the program develops, the communities will become more critical and demanding about what they want to see, but at this early stage the mood is one of pure hunger to see anything and everything. Aboriginal people want to see work from other communities around the NT and they are very interested in work by or about other indigenous people. So the exhibition at The Australian Museum, *Frank Hurley in Papua 1921-23*, has been a real winner especially amongst older people who have pored over the rich detail of village life in Hurley's extraordinary photographs—saying of them "same like us but similar". More and more communities are signing up for the exhibition and Officer has applied for an extension of the tour.

Touring art to remote communities is a two way education process. The other end involves encouraging artists and institutions to think creatively and flexibly within existing constraints. For example, work needs to be durable to cope with the climate and environment, and there are size restrictions—because it has to fit into light planes, it must be less than one metre long and 60 centimetres wide when crated, and "two-man liftable". However there are artists like George Gittoes who are willing to offer original drawings for exhibition because they have a strong desire to show their work in communities with which they have formed strong personal connections.

Does art have anything to learn from rock 'n' roll? Officer thinks so. At the recent Museums Australia Conference she attended in Sydney, she saw in the trade section an old mate from her music industry days who was displaying art crates made from light-weight metal and lined with ether foam, adapted from instrument and amplifier cases.