



# The Hottest Gallery in the World

10 years at 24HR Art — Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art (1990–2000)

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# Introduction

Born in a crumbling, disused petrol station and reincarnated some years later in an old cinema, 24HR Art is now a ten year phenomenon.

24HR Art in Darwin is quite unlike any other contemporary art organisation in Australia. For a small, modestly funded institution it has, over its ten year history, presented a remarkable number of exhibitions and other projects defying any misguided notion that nothing significant ever comes from the geographic peripheries. Capitalising on the Northern Territory's distinct character and environment, these projects have worked to define and debate significant aspects of our culture, our place within the Asia Pacific region and our connections to the larger global village.

24HR Art is more than just an art gallery. Its impact over the past decade has been to provide opportunities which did not previously exist: opportunity for Territory based artists to exhibit their work in a non-commercial context, providing a forum for their ideas and a context for their practice alongside their interstate and international peers; opportunity for local audiences to see the work of innovative contemporary artists from other locales; and opportunity for critical engagement with a variety of social, aesthetic and conceptual concerns. In doing all this, 24HR Art has forged strong connections with a diverse range of local communities and developed an audience comprising not just established gallery visitors but also many people with little or no previous association with contemporary art.

This publication celebrates the distinct character of 24HR Art, revisiting a diverse range of projects which, together, have defined its aspirations, preoccupations and achievements.

'... this could  
only **happen**  
in Darwin.'<sup>1</sup>

1. Marcia Langton, quoted in papers from *Wjuy Niz...?* forum, 24HR Art, 1998.



Franck Gobier *Feral* 1995

# the fan club

24HR Art is a non-profit, non-commercial organisation whose main objective is to provide a supportive environment for the development of innovative contemporary visual art in the Territory... It used to be known as the hottest gallery in the world but a Fan Club formed to get all that hot air out...<sup>1</sup>

A man of stone, with a stone heart was sweating, the little glittering rose flag on his collar was glistening. He said the place was too hot and it was, all agreed with him this time. He said whatever tribute you can gather I shall multiply it somefold and you will have air-con... But the people said we don't want air con, it's not sustainable and, besides, who will pay the power bill... and they gave up their gold and silver, their cheques and their plastics to make the fans whirr blade by blade and by degrees the hottest gallery in the world became a little cooler.<sup>2</sup>

Salon Obscure 1992



1. Thelma John, article in *Eyeframe magazine*, 1991.

2. Suzanne Spunner, catalogue essay for *re-site*, 24HR Art, 2000.

# the story of 24HR Art (a succinct rendition)

Darwin, only ten years ago, was a fairly unsupportive environment in which to make art. There were very few opportunities to see good shows of new work, either by local artists or artists from elsewhere, no dynamic exhibition venues, limited forums for critical debate or exchange and little support for professional development. Despite this situation, there were always good artists coming to Darwin, drawn sometimes by the lure of the exotic, sometimes by the warm climate, sometimes by the dynamism of Aboriginal culture in the Top End. (At the same time, the best work being produced by Northern Territory Aboriginal artists was generally flown straight to Melbourne, Sydney or overseas, rarely being seen by local audiences.)

There was a large turnout of people to a public meeting at the Northern Territory Museum in November 1986, addressed by Ross Wolfe, then the Director of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council. The meeting promoted the idea of establishing a properly resourced Northern Territory contemporary art space, for which the Australia Council pledged in-principle support and potential funding, subject to certain conditions. A steering committee was established to develop the idea of a contemporary art space into a concrete proposal, and to develop funding submissions to the Commonwealth and Territory governments. Some amusingly vague discussion occurred at meetings of this committee, where it was apparent that contemporary art meant vastly different things to different people. Nevertheless, everyone was united in their desire to see the development of something where, currently, there was really nothing.

The concerted work of this steering committee went on for years, during which time people departed and new ones came on board. Numerous tricky negotiations with both the Commonwealth and Territory governments and with private sector sponsors were enacted in order to secure a realistic minimum funding base and to find a suitable physical site from which to operate. It was 1990 before a Northern Territory contemporary art space finally became operational and 24HR Art was born.

Looking back on his time as inaugural Director of 24HR Art, Chris Downie believes that the establishment of a contemporary art space made everyone lift their game. Horizons became significantly expanded for artists and for anyone interested in art.

# Ten years down the track

Artists have been meeting in Darwin for four years trying to get something like this off the ground. They've got quite a large art school...and there's a lot of activity going on but no focus for it. There's the Northern Territory Museum & Gallery, but it's got a heavy anthropological focus. There's been nowhere for graduates from art school to go, most of them leave the Territory the minute they graduate...<sup>1</sup>

Succeeding Chris Downie in the position of Director at the end of 1991, Judy Kean described the objectives of the organisation:

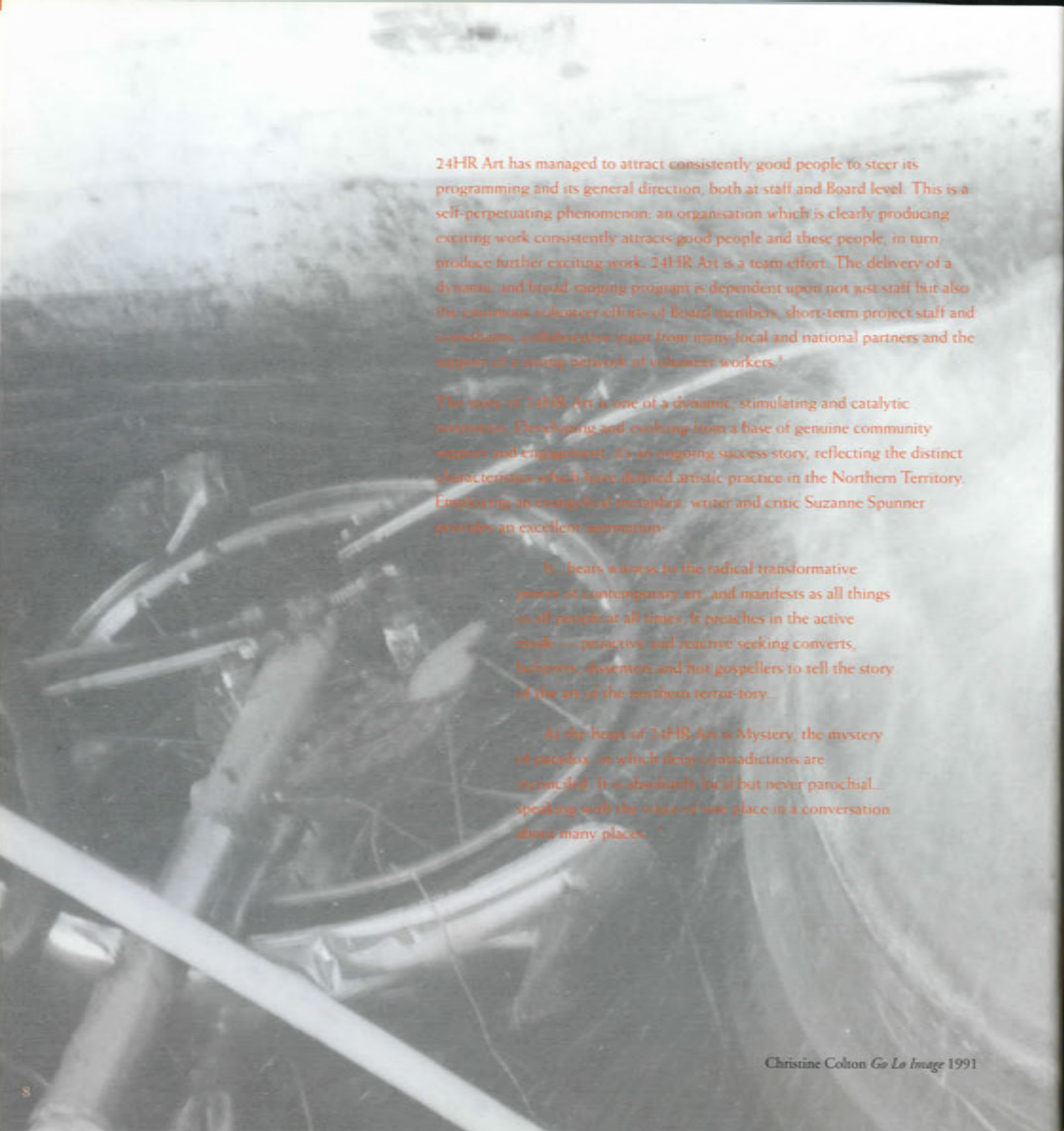
Enter...24HR Art...a fusion between the vision of an arts community which wanted an exhibition venue and a supportive base for contemporary visual art, and the [Australia Council's] Visual Art/Craft Board's desire to see a contemporary art space established in each State/Territory. In key ways, finding the complementary blend of these different but related sets of expectations within the context of the NT is the main challenge for 24HR Art.

The organisation's objectives fall into three main areas: To provide a focus for visual arts and artists in the NT (access to ideas, information and resources); the development of links and dialogue between artists in the NT and their peers elsewhere; and the development of a program which reflects particular characteristics of the NT which are at the same time relevant nationally.<sup>2</sup>

Ten years down the track, 24HR Art is still faithful to these objectives. In practical terms, the organisation presents an ongoing program of on- and off-site exhibitions and events. It produces a newsletter, a web-site, exhibition catalogues and other publications. It provides professional support for artists through advocacy, promotion and referral. It undertakes access, education and audience development initiatives and supports arts industry research and project development in collaboration with a diverse range of partners. (All of this by an organisation with only two full-time staff and a small operating budget.)



Christine Colton *Go Lo Image* 1991



24HR Art has managed to attract consistently good people to steer its programming and its general direction, both at staff and Board level. This is a self-perpetuating phenomenon: an organisation which is clearly producing exciting work consistently attracts good people and these people, in turn, produce further exciting work. 24HR Art is a team effort. The delivery of a dynamic and broad-ranging program is dependent upon not just staff but also the enormous volunteer efforts of board members, short-term project staff and consultants, collaborative input from many local and national partners and the support of a strong network of volunteer workers.<sup>1</sup>

The story of 24HR Art is one of a dynamic, stimulating and catalytic institution. Developing and evolving from a base of genuine community support and engagement, it is an ongoing success story, reflecting the distinct characteristics which have defined artistic practice in the Northern Territory. Employing an evangelical metaphor, writer and critic Suzanne Spinner provides an excellent summation:

It...bears witness to the radical transformative power of contemporary art...and manifests as all things to all people at all times. It preaches in the active mode — proactive and reactive seeking converts, believers, dissenters and hot gospellers to tell the story of the art of the northern territory...

At the heart of 24HR Art is Mystery, the mystery of paradox, in which deep contradictions are reconciled. It is absolutely local but never parochial...speaking with the voice of one place in a conversation about many places.<sup>2</sup>



1. Interview with Chris Downie, *Eyeform* magazine, 1989.
2. July Kean, article in *Pierisbery* magazine, November 1992.
3. A listing of 24HR Art staff and Board members over the period 1990–2000 is included at the back of this publication.
4. Suzanne Sawyer, catalogue essay for re-site, 24HR Art, 2000.



# Archaeology of **place**

Darwin is a city perpetually being made over. It's a development boom town, where new real estate is constantly being erected upon sites recently demolished. Just looking around, it's hard to know much at all of this city's colourful history or character. There's nothing left, for example, of several hotels which were for many years the centre of life in a big-drinking town — the Seabreeze at Fannie Bay, the Dolphin in Nightcliff, the Hotel Darwin on the Esplanade. The story of 24HR Art involves the reclamation and redevelopment of two sites with a rich cultural history. Fortunately, stories relating to these sites have been acknowledged and celebrated as a deliberate aspect of the 24HR Art program.

Sites of significance and everyday — a petrol station, a picture house and art gallery — 10 years of breathing new life into sites, expanding possibilities...!

The establishment of a space from which a Northern Territory contemporary art space could become a functioning reality came about by virtue of a genuine do-it-yourself philosophy. A benevolent landlord with a site earmarked for eventual demolition and redevelopment was sweet-talked into lending his decaying property on a rent-free basis. 24HR Art came to be born in a disused petrol station, with members and volunteers turning up with brooms, building tools and paint brushes to transform a mechanic's workshop into a gallery space. Performance events took place around the old lube pit, discarded automotive parts were dutifully buried out the back and audiences came to fill up their heads with art rather than their cars with fuel. The Go-Lo petrol station was famous as a 24 hour operation, and the naming of 24HR Art was in reference to this aspect of the site and its heritage. (As well, activity at 24HR Art has never been confined to regular office hours — it's a place where art can happen around the clock.)

A few years later, when this initial site was no longer safe or viable, 24HR Art was fortunate once again to find another benevolent landlord, this time prepared to include a gallery space within the redevelopment of a disused picture theatre. What was once a projection booth is now an office, the windows of which look out over a gallery space where cinema goers once sat eating jaffas and watching the silver screen. A great strength of this location is its immediate proximity to one of Darwin's greatest institutions, the Parap Saturday markets. This proximity draws hundreds of visitors into the gallery every Saturday, most of them clutching a pawpaw salad, a satay chicken wing or a fresh mango icecream.



Frantz Ehmann *Open Panoramas*  
(*The drowned and the saved*) 2000

(stories  
from two sites)



Steve Fox *For this Mob* 2000

Writer and anthropologist Gary Lee tells the story of a petrol station and a picture theatre:

This service station operated for a long time being the only one in the area, but when the flash new BP Service Station opened opposite in 1969 Fannie Bay Car Sales moved out and Continental Motors moved in. After the cyclone (Cyclone Tracy) Continental Motors moved on and it became Perfect Tune and O'Hara's Roadlines until the mid 1980s. By the late eighties the site had become Go-Lo 24 HR Service Station which proved to be very popular with locals due to the cheap petrol on sale there. In 1989 the site was sold and 24HR Art opened in the old premises but after a few years such an old building, ravaged each year by the wet season meant that a new location had to be found. That place was the old Parap Theatre building...

The Parap Pictures was originally an open air cinema with canvas seats...Who knows what was in the minds of the builders to build an open-air picture theatre in Darwin of all places. Admittedly there was a partially covered area but the rest was open to the skies which was great in the dry season. People soon complained about the 'hoons', as they were called, who found it good fun to drive down Vimy Lane and throw crackers over the wall. More regularly, people running on foot or 'revving' down the lane would drag a piece of pipe or something similar along the corrugated iron wall, making a hell of a racket and annoying everyone in the process... After the cyclone a roof was put over the viewing area and in 1979 Parap Pictures became very flash when it was done up with air conditioning. Down towards the screen on the left hand side Jeannie's Snack Bar opened which at the time sold the best hamburgers in Darwin...

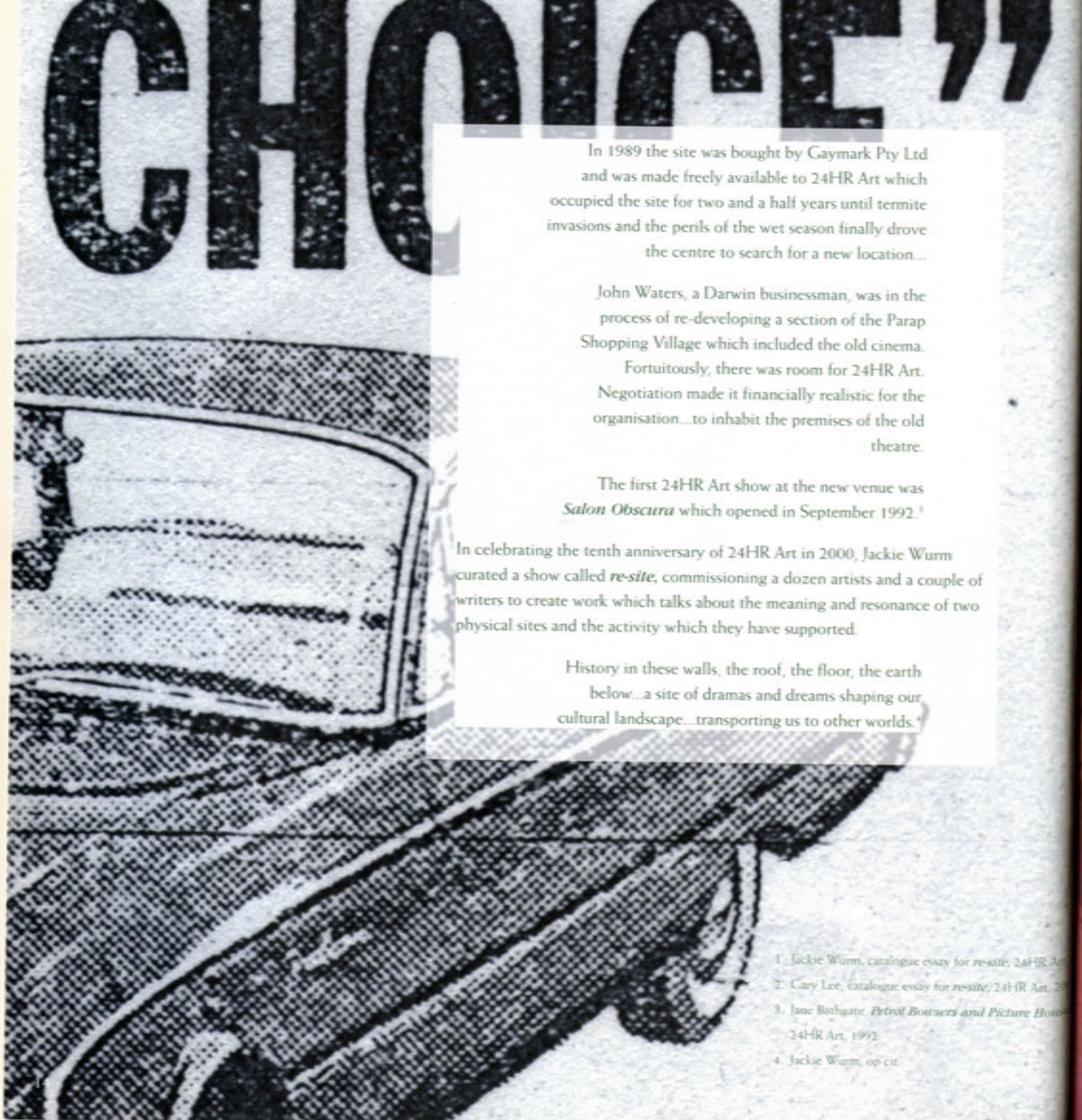
fresh  
mango  
icecream

When the Darwin Cinema was built in Mitchell Street in the mid 1980s this newer more flash complex spelt the end for the (Nightcliff) Drive-In and the Parap Theatre. I can remember feeling sad when news came that the good old Parap Pictures was to cease operations. By this time the Parap Shopping Village was being gentrified and the old familiar shops changed facades and names although some remained and thankfully the Parap Theatre building was retained. For a few years the building sat forlornly before being used as a storehouse for the NT Museum's maritime collection...<sup>2</sup>

When 24HR Art shifted from Fannie Bay to its new home in Parap Lane Bathgate was commissioned to record some historical information about the respective sites.

In the late '80s Go-Lo 24HR Service Station appears for a fleeting moment before going out of business, apparently due to a price blockade by the big petrol companies. Go-Lo's demise signals the end of the site's use as a service station and used car dealership.

# CHOICE”



In 1989 the site was bought by Gaymark Pty Ltd and was made freely available to 24HR Art which occupied the site for two and a half years until termite invasions and the perils of the wet season finally drove the centre to search for a new location...

John Waters, a Darwin businessman, was in the process of re-developing a section of the Parap Shopping Village which included the old cinema.

Fortuitously, there was room for 24HR Art. Negotiation made it financially realistic for the organisation...to inhabit the premises of the old theatre.

The first 24HR Art show at the new venue was *Salon Obscura* which opened in September 1992.<sup>3</sup>

In celebrating the tenth anniversary of 24HR Art in 2000, Jackie Wurm curated a show called *re-site*, commissioning a dozen artists and a couple of writers to create work which talks about the meaning and resonance of two physical sites and the activity which they have supported.

History in these walls, the roof, the floor, the earth below...a site of dramas and dreams shaping our cultural landscape...transporting us to other worlds.<sup>4</sup>

1. Jackie Wurm, catalogue essay for *re-site*, 24HR Art.

2. Gary Lee, catalogue essay for *re-site*, 24HR Art, 2000.

3. Jane Barham, *Petrol Browsers and Picture Houses*, 24HR Art, 1992.

4. Jackie Wurm, *op cit*.



Judy Kean



Thelma John

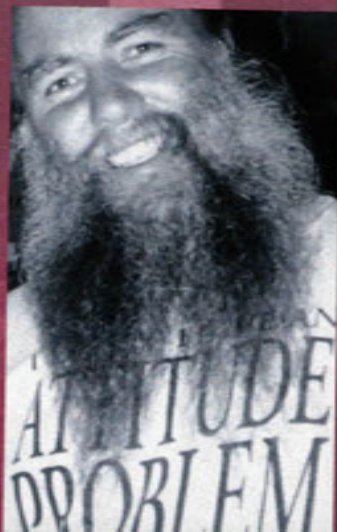
Geraldine Tyson



Cath Bowdler



Steve Fox



Jackie Wurm



all things to all people



Serena Kuhl *Glory Box* Installation View 1998

24HR Art has never been afraid to be uncool. Recognising that it has a diverse role to fulfil, it's covered a huge amount of ground in its programming of exhibitions and events.

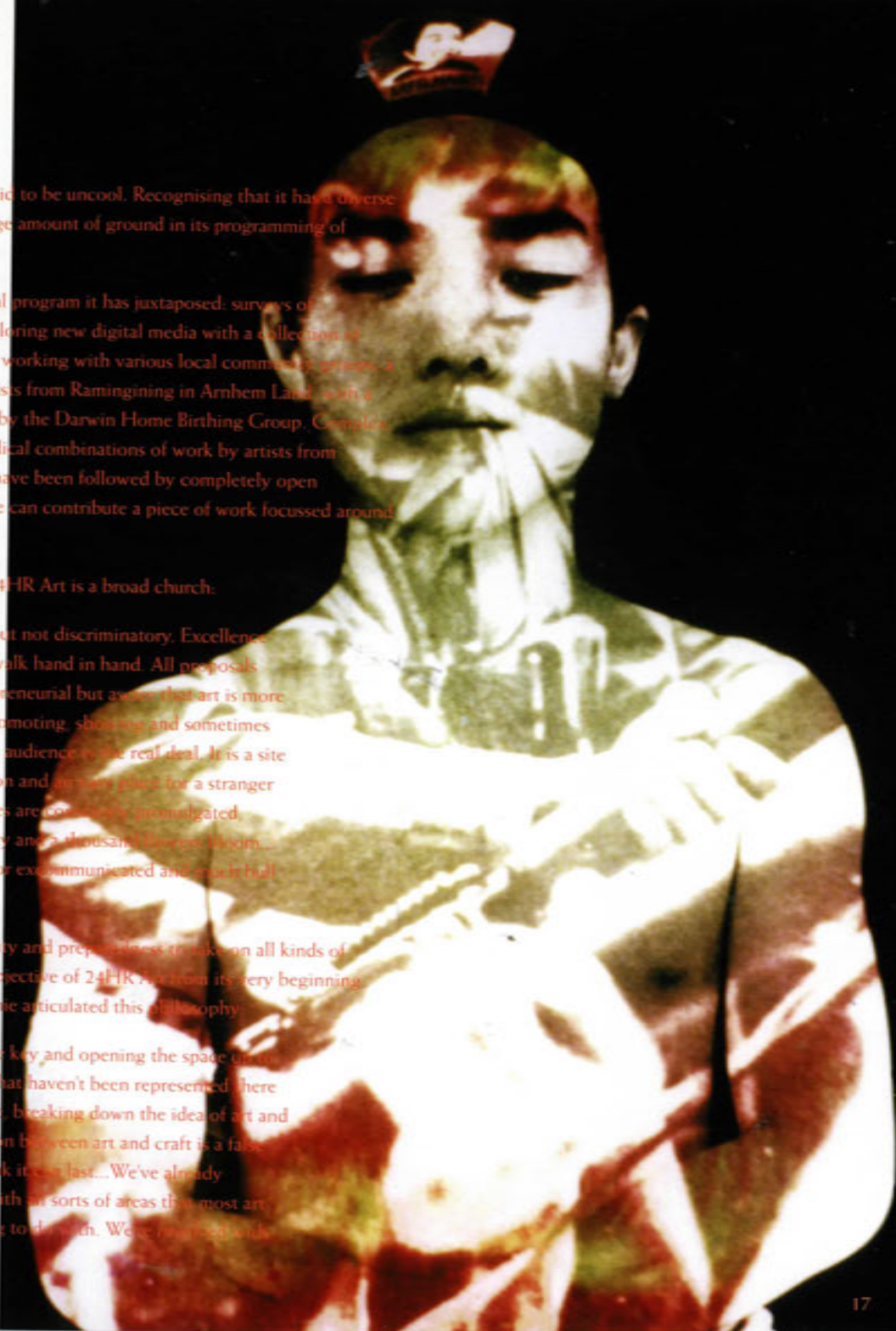
Within the scope of an annual program it has juxtaposed: surveys of significant work by artists exploring new digital media with a collection of banners produced by an artist working with various local community groups; a collection of new work by artists from Ramingining in Arnhem Land; with a show of photographs curated by the Darwin Home Birthing Group. Complex thematic shows presenting radical combinations of work by artists from diverse cultural backgrounds have been followed by completely open members' shows where anyone can contribute a piece of work focussed around a given theme or format.

As Suzanne Spinner puts it, 24HR Art is a broad church:

...Discerning but not discriminatory. Excellence and Accessibility walk hand in hand. All proposals considered. Entrepreneurial but aware that art is more than a business, promoting, showcasing and sometimes selling, finding the audience is the real deal. It is a site of transubstantiation and an easy place for a stranger to enter... Dialogues are constantly promulgated, dissent is orthodoxy and a thousand flowers bloom... None are cast out or excommunicated and each hall [is] tolerated.'

This open embracing of diversity and preparedness to take on all kinds of projects has been an explicit objective of 24HR Art from its very beginning. Inaugural Director Chris Downie articulated this philosophy:

Openness is the key and opening the space to all kinds of artists that haven't been represented there before. For instance, breaking down the idea of art and craft. The distinction between art and craft is a false one and I don't think it can last... We've already become involved with all sorts of areas that most art spaces have nothing to do with. We've worked with



Keep Australia Beautiful, the Bougainvillea Festival. We're making our space available to the Trades & Labour Council to work on their banners. One of the original aims of the Contemporary Art Spaces was to make the art process more visible and that hasn't happened. We have to bring out that idea of the accessibility of the process.<sup>2</sup>

Central to the multifarious programming and crusading of 24HR Art has been an intelligent recognition of the place in which it operates and the audience it seeks to address. The reality of operating in a city like Darwin is that there's no substantial sub-culture of contemporary art aficionados, absorbed in a sophisticated and esoteric discourse around art trends and issues. There's no point presenting a program of exhibitions around rarefied themes and forms that are of little interest to anyone except maybe a few dozen members of the local populace.

The organisation thereby willingly fails to please all of the people, all of the time. The inevitable consequence of 24HR Art's ongoing balancing act, wherein shows of formally and conceptually challenging work alternate with projects more targeted towards the ready engagement of local communities, is perpetual debate about the good, the bad and the ugly. Different people nominate different periods in the organisation's history as being the most exciting and stimulating. They identify vastly different exhibitions or projects as embodiments of 24HR Art's greatest achievements. Looking back over the past decade, most observers will readily nominate specific examples of bad art, on the one hand, and genuinely inspiring or revelatory work on the other. Naturally though, there will be much disagreement, contradiction and passionate debate around the specific art at point.

Perhaps the most notable thing about walking into 24HR Art is that people are nearly always there, looking at the art: they're thinking, talking and making connections, and it's especially significant that they're not always the same bunch of people. It's a place that works hard to engage a diverse audience. Steve Fox has recorded various observations on this objective:

The Wet brings the long-grassers inside, not right inside usually but under cover...They are part of our



audience after all. Through their window they are able to see some of the most stimulating shows held in Darwin.<sup>3</sup>

Some people would question what a Contemporary Art Centre is doing holding a year 12 show, what they don't see is the benefits this show has especially in a small community like Darwin — not to mention how great their work is. Most of these kids become members of 24HR Art, they all use us as a base for research on Contemporary Art and the ones that had their works in this show got a huge buzz from being included in what has become a somewhat prestigious event — anyway, don't be so fucking serious.<sup>4</sup>

*Birth — a moment in time...*[was] a very moving exhibition of images, photos and photocopies — never before or since have I seen so many babies and young mothers in the gallery.<sup>5</sup>

Writing about the spectacular banners produced by Joanna Barrkman in association with various communities, Helen Buchanan comments that:

'Art' has come to be a label attached to a separate category of aesthetic objects that are apart from both utilitarian objects and from the spiritual (and often social) values of action. Art and craft traditions however are founded upon the unity of spiritual and social states of being and practical actions: the balance of inner and outer reality open to all men and women, not just those who think of themselves as artists.<sup>6</sup>



Callum Hickey *Under the Rug* 1996

They are  
part of our  
audience  
after all.  
Through  
their  
WINDOW  
they are  
able to see  
some of the  
most  
stimulating  
shows held  
in Darwin

There has always been a diverse range of perspectives driving the development of 24HR Art's policy and programs. Board members and key staff have changed regularly, and the transient nature of the Northern Territory population has meant that new people are constantly coming along, joining up and affecting the direction of the organisation. Reflecting the visions of the various Directors and Boards which have driven 24HR Art at different stages over the past decade, program emphasis and focus has shifted from time to time. The recent inclusion of a range of curated projects involving the exploration of new, multi-media technologies is distinct from the greater emphasis, a few years ago, on short-term artist-driven exhibitions and community based projects. Nevertheless, as suggested above, the program pursued during any given year has always contained diverse elements and unlikely juxtapositions.

## Bending over Backwards

24HR Art has placed no restrictions upon what artists can do with the gallery space, and the organisation has been flexible in supporting work in all manner of media. Steve Fox promoted the notion that, at 24HR Art, a place could be found for whatever you wanted to do. (He was never reticent, either, about personally taking up a hammer or a paint roller in order to achieve the desired transformation of the exhibition space.) Geraldine Tyson recalls the domestic diplomacy required to patch up relations with the Chinese restaurant next door to 24HR Art following an incident associated with the *Veneer* exhibition. The installation of Michael Dolk's work required the removal of a brick from the gallery wall. Unfortunately, the resulting hole broke all the way through to the restaurant, with the dislodged brick narrowly missing two statues of Buddha.

24HR Art has pursued innovative approaches to supporting the development of Northern Territory artists. It has welcomed the involvement of, and presented the work of, university and high school students, prisoners, ferals (a term usually referring to dreadlocked youth and ageing hippies — always present in Darwin in reasonable numbers), ethnic community groups, women's groups, trade unionists, anthropologists, academics, political activists, technocrats, musicians, writers and architects, all of whom have contributed to a distinct kaleidoscope of cultural expression.

Since 1995, 24HR Art has annually awarded a one-person show to a new graduate from the School of Art and Design at the Northern Territory University. Some of these have been exceptional shows, perhaps most notably Dennis Bezzant's exhibition *Simply Baskets*, about which Morag Fraser writes:

Bezzant's anthropology is bubbling and obviously a source of energy for his work. He 'reads' baskets as a medium of adaption and change...the work itself is lucid, intricate and evocative...poignant to the point of elegiac. And some of it achingly beautiful.<sup>7</sup>

Supporting the professional development of significant or emerging Northern Territory based artists is a constant key objective. Jacki Fleet, Pamela Lofts, Dan Murphy, Franck Cohier, Judith Miller, Lisa Beilby, Annie Taylor, Micko Srbnovski, Cath Bowdler, Micheline Yoke Yean Lee, Lia Gill, Bilha Smith and Sharon Pacey: these are just a few of the artists whose careers have received vital support from 24HR Art over the past decade. A significant aspect of 24HR Art's work in this area has been the production of good quality catalogues, redressing the relative dearth of documentation of work by non-indigenous contemporary artists in the Northern Territory.

Concerted efforts have been made to engage particular local communities within specific projects. Darwin's Vietnamese community was actively involved in the presentation of *Discoveries*, an exhibition by Indochinese refugees now living in western Sydney. Local bikers were tattooed in the gallery as part of an event associated with *60 Heads*, an exhibition by Canberra artist eX de Medici. The Darwin Dog Obedience Association presented dogs jumping over burning hurdles at a memorable event associated with the famous *Dog Show* members' exhibition.



Dennis Bezzant *Simply Baskets* Installation View 1999

The great and distinct strength of 24HR Art is that it has combined strong local knowledge with astute and wide-ranging perspectives on the broader world. Presentation of diverse art has been informed by an intelligent consideration of local context. The art hasn't been presented in a vacuum, and remarkable connections have been established between artist and audiences. Everyone can nominate exhibitions and projects which they've either enjoyed or detested. The significant thing, though, is that no-one can be sure what they're likely to encounter next time they stick their head into the gallery.



Jacki Fleet *Celestial Event* 1995

1. Suzanne Spinner, catalogue essay for *re-site*, 24HR Art, 2000.
2. Interview with Chris Downie, *Eyeline* magazine, 1991.
3. Steve Fox, article in *RealTime* magazine, 1995.
4. Steve Fox, Director's Report, 24HR Art Annual Report, 1997.
5. Steve Fox, Director's Report, 24HR Art Annual Report, 1994.
6. Helen Buchanan, catalogue essay for *Against the Wind*, 24HR Art, 1998.
7. Morag Fraser, 'Simply baskets', *Art Monthly Australia*, December 1999.



Lia Gill *Cocoons, Cross Fibre* Installation View 1995

In *Cross Fibre*, pandanus weaving and objects of bark and bush string by fourteen artists from Ramingining...which speak of the fusion between traditional and contemporary cultural practice among Aboriginal artists, were exhibited alongside the cocoons of Darwin artist Lia Gill...[and] a cocoon piece from Pamela Lofts of Central Australia..

24HR Art has consistently exhibited Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists together where possible...as part of a deliberate positioning, where contemporary Territory art is recognised to be of great diversity and often has a strong relationship with place. Place transcends race, the commonalities transcend the differences. This is integration without watering down. This is about two ways and coming together...

This show could not/would not have been created anywhere else — it had the Territory stamped all over it, where black meets white and the past meets the future.<sup>2</sup>

a road  
movie in the  
gallery.

In this sense, 24HR Art has sought to address and promote indigenous work within a broad context of cross-cultural sharing and exchange. Exploiting the rich and genuine multiculturalism which has always characterised the Northern Territory, 24HR has instigated and presented projects which make connections, share stories and promote critical discourse spanning various cultural and racial divides. *Family Ties, Against the Wind, The Meeting of Waters* and *ripe* — NT Emerging Artists exhibition are further examples of projects which illustrate this ambition and achievement. It's an ongoing objective: 24HR Art's current program includes *Ideal Format #10*, where work by a diverse range of Aboriginal artists is interspersed amid work from other places and cultural backgrounds.

## Not a souvenir shop, not a museum

From its inception, 24HR Art set out to present various kinds of Aboriginal art seldom shown in Darwin. Being neither a commercial enterprise catering to a ready market of tourists and art buyers, nor a museum collecting for posterity, 24HR Art has been able to reveal different aspects of contemporary Aboriginal practice. This has included work by emerging artists, both urban based and from remote communities, explicitly political work and work produced through collaborative, cross-cultural projects. In *Two Laws...One Big Spirit*, Peter Adsett and Rusty Peters present a complex dialogue directed towards the achievement of genuine cross-cultural reconciliation. This show of stunning paintings incorporated a closing ceremony, which featured a Massacre Corroboree performed by Rusty's kin, Gija men and women from the East Kimberley, the power of which left many in the 150 strong audience moved to tears.

Prior to the advent of 24HR Art, most of the best art made in remote Aboriginal communities throughout the Territory would never be seen by a local audience. Work would be flown directly out of communities and into galleries in Sydney or Melbourne or even directly out of Australia altogether. 24HR Art effectively managed to grab some of this work on its way through. Chris Downie recalls the excitement of seeing work coming straight out of Arnhem Land and onto the walls at 24HR Art, demonstrating the willingness of artists from different communities to participate in the contemporary art scene.



Gawirrin Gumana courtesy Buku-Larrnggay Arts, Yirrkala



Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels & Anne Mosey *Nyarrawiji, Nyarrawiji, Long Time Ago* 1991

Sunset at Darwin airport. The old prop aircraft (DC3) arrived after many hours wait. When the hatch opened you could smell Arnhem Land... We unloaded the precious cargo, the first [sic] to set eyes on these works. Quite a few important curators flew to Darwin just to see the work before it left Australia forever.<sup>3</sup>

*Canvassing*, presented in 1994, was another instance of significant new work being revealed to a Northern Territory audience prior to being exported interstate. Produced by acclaimed artists from Ramingining, this show of unstretched canvases was particularly significant in showing a new departure from painting on bark. Thelma John recalls the photographic exhibition *Yimanka Ngini Tiwi Wupamurrumi — Photos of Tiwi People working and bunting together* as one of the first times that 24HR Art was full of Aboriginal people.

The Tiwi people involved in the show arranged charter flights to bring dancers and community members to the opening. Significant as a collection of portraits taken by Tiwi people themselves, the exhibition implicitly sought to subvert an earlier tradition of portrait photographs taken by missionaries on Bathurst and Melville islands.<sup>4</sup>

Exhibitions such as *Bilawara* (a Larrakia name for the area now known as Parap) and subsequent imported shows including *Blakness* and *Black Humour* have presented radical mixtures of work by artists from diverse backgrounds and locales in order to amplify generally unacknowledged aspects of Aboriginal practice. *Bilawara* was especially notable in celebrating connections between significant southern Aboriginal artists such as Trevor Nickolls and the late Robert Campbell Jnr and specific Arnhem Land artists and communities. More generally, all of these exhibitions worked to overcome tired categorical interpretations of Aboriginal art, particularly the conventional distinction between so called 'traditional' and 'urban' artists.

Exhibitions of personal and politically focussed new work by artists such as Destiny Deacon and Brenda Croft, as well as collaborative installations by Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels and Anne Mosey have provoked a consideration of issues which disrupt comfortable audience expectations of Aboriginal art.





Julie Dowling *Boorblack* 1995

Is this a  
projection  
of their  
own  
anxieties?

At the same time, recent exhibitions such as *might be* by Anne Mosey and *Earth, Wings and Wire* by Melbourne based artist Vicky Shukuroglou, together with earlier shows by Territory artists Rod Moss and Marie McMahon, presented outcomes from often complex collaborations and interactions between non-Aboriginal artists and particular Aboriginal communities.

Undoubtedly, the most provocative and ground-breaking 24HR Art project concerning Aboriginal art and culture has been the critical forum and accompanying exhibition *Wijay Na...?* (a Kriol term meaning Which way now?). Focussed around the cultural and political implications of Aboriginal content within work produced both by indigenous and non-indigenous artists, this project revealed numerous pathways taken across difficult terrain. The forum involved more than 140 people and engendered hot debate in response to the work of some seventeen artists and curators. In offering a summary of proceedings, Suzanne Spinner wrote that:

... issues which generated the most heat were collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists; the depiction of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal artists and the question of the use of Aboriginal imagery and motif. Various speakers came under fire and were attacked and defended from the floor and vigorously argued and asserted their freedom to pursue particular collaborations and ways of seeing Aboriginal people. Opinions still vary as to which way was promulgated but it was certain that now no *one* way, but rather many different ways — forward... [were] acknowledged and their problematics ventilated.<sup>5</sup>

In another review of the event, Daena Murray outlined some of the contentious issues broached:

...what are we to make of work by a non-Aboriginal artist which depicts an Aborigine sitting cross-legged on the ground? Is it merely a deprecatory cultural cliché or can it be read as a positive statement about the Aborigine's closeness to the earth? Does our

perception of such an image change if we learn that the artist is not white but Chinese?...Why do white artists generally avoid any reference to drunken Aborigines? Is this a projection of their own anxieties?...And how are we to respond to depictions of Aborigines as anonymous representatives of their race? Are they examples of a dehumanising iconism, of positive or negative stereotyping, or of sensitive reluctance to identify individuals?...only in the Northern Territory could such complicated and delicate discussion take place without imploding into rancour, misunderstanding and bitterness. Perhaps because Territory delegates (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) were used to an everyday cultural mix, they could help to bring the detachment of theory and the heat of politics down to earth...<sup>6</sup>



Brian Nyinawanga *Visions of the City* 1993

a time when relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians remain depressingly polarised, with old positions being endlessly defended and restated, it's vital that 24HR Art should continue to initiate and support projects which genuinely move us along, provoking constructive engagement with difficult issues and engendering appreciation of hitherto alien or misunderstood positions.

1. Thelma John, article in *RealTime* magazine, 1994.
2. Thelma John, article in *Eyeline* magazine, 1994.
3. Interview with Chris Downie, 2000.
4. Thelma John, Director's Report, 24HR Art Annual Report, 1993.
5. Suzanne Spinner, 'Cross cultural conferenceville', *RealTime* magazine, 1996.
6. Daena Murray, 'Wijay Na...?', *Art Monthly Australia*, August 1996.

There's an official, semi-formal dress code in the Northern Territory known as Territory Rig. A gentleman invited to some government function where this code is stipulated is required to wear either a long sleeved shirt and tie or barong, or else a long sleeved batik shirt. You're unlikely to find the barong or the batik shirt included in an official dress code anywhere else in Australia. As the self-proclaimed gateway to Asia, Darwin is the centre of one of the few parts of Australia with a genuine long-term Asian cultural heritage. Twenty years before the Hawke and Keating governments' push for Australia's increasing identification with the Asia-Pacific region, the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory was already embracing the art and culture of South-East Asia as a central aspect of its programming.<sup>1</sup>

In the early days of 24HR Art, Judy Kean sought to underline this position:

I like to think (as many do) that Darwin has long been distinguished as much by an orientation towards Asia as by any inclination to glance back over its shoulder towards distant cities — colonial outposts whose style it could never really emulate and which were themselves oblivious to its existence other than to marvel at a Phoenix-like persistence in the face of bombing and natural disaster...The presence of a large population of Aboriginal people with strong ties to ancestral lands, a history of pre-colonial contacts with Macassan neighbours, geography, climate, distance, isolation, patterns and traces of settlement and industry, a history closely woven with the stories of many cultures — all distinguish this northern edge of Australia from its densely settled south-east rim.<sup>2</sup>

In maintaining a significant commitment to the presentation of projects which underline and explore Australia's connections to South-East Asia, 24HR Art has built upon the substantial ongoing engagement of other local agencies, including the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), the Northern Territory University and the Bougainvillea Festival (now the Festival of Darwin). Additionally, 24HR Art has been able to establish working connections with major events interstate, including the Artists Regional Exchange (ARX) projects held primarily in Perth in the early 1990s, the



Heri Dono *Kuda Binal* Performance 1994

subsequent Asia Pacific Triennials in Brisbane and various Adelaide Festival and Sydney Biennale events.

The hosting of a nine week residency by Filipino artist Alan Rivera in 1992 was 24HR Art's first significant exercise in cross-cultural exchange. In an ambitious program, Rivera presented lectures and workshops, made visits to Arnhem Land and Alice Springs and worked with students at the Northern Territory University, leading to the presentation of an installation titled *Church of the Crucified Forms*. The residency raised complex issues and provoked questions from all sides about how best to facilitate effective cross-cultural exchange through projects of this nature. Reflecting on his experiences, Rivera wrote:

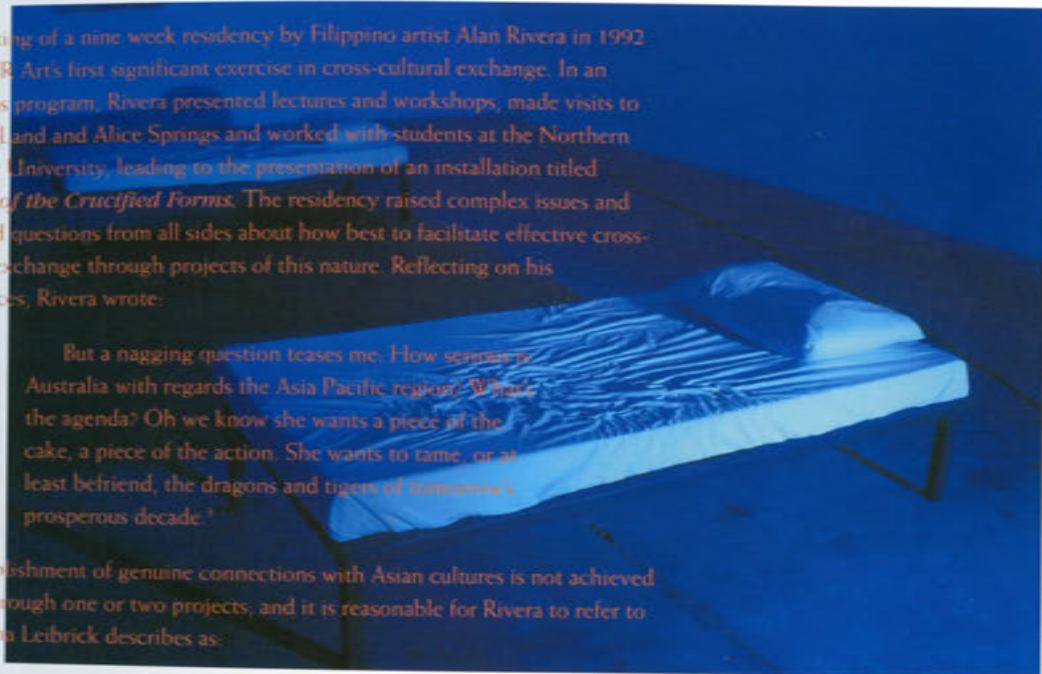
But a nagging question teases me. How serious is Australia with regards the Asia Pacific region? What's the agenda? Oh we know she wants a piece of the cake, a piece of the action. She wants to tame, or at least befriend, the dragons and tigers of tomorrow's prosperous decade.<sup>3</sup>

The establishment of genuine connections with Asian cultures is not achieved simply through one or two projects, and it is reasonable for Rivera to refer to what Fiona Leibrick describes as:

a deeply ingrained Australian disinterest in non-Euro-American cultures — a disinterest not quickly overcome by slick PR campaigns and schemes of tied government funding.<sup>4</sup>

24HR Art has continued to address this issue, working to establish links with local Asian communities through a range of specific projects. Dancers and speakers from the Lafaek East Timorese Association opened the exhibition of community banners *Against the Wind*. Members of the East Timorese community also engaged with the NxT Multimedia Symposium, coinciding as it did with an influx of evacuees into Darwin in the wake of the East Timorese referendum and subsequent upheavals in 1999.

24HR Art worked with the Northern Territory University to present *The Meeting of Waters*, an exhibition of prints produced through a studio based exchange between artists from Indonesia, the Philippines, Darwin and Arnhem Land.



Poonkin Khut *Pillausongi* 2000



Neil Emmerson *Gui Nan Feng* 1995

This show featured as part of the 1998 Festival of Darwin and also the Olympic Arts Festival *A Sea Change*.

*Discoveries*, a sprawling exhibition by western Sydney high school students originally from Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and China, depicted the refugee experiences of 'boat people' from these countries. A number of the artists involved came up to Darwin with the exhibition, enabling 24HR Art to establish new links with the local Vietnamese community.

In November 1997, as local skies were blackened with smoke from rainforest fires raging in Indonesia, Jan and Ben Somerville presented a poignant performance work outside the gallery, commenting upon the closeness of our northern neighbours and the impacts of catastrophic events on the other side of the Timor Sea. In particular, the work referred to Indonesian plans to build nuclear reactors in close proximity to geological fault lines, fuelled in part by uranium mined in northern Australia.

An ambitious project with Indonesian artist Heri Dono is perhaps the most significant and certainly the most spectacular Asia-focused initiative undertaken by 24HR Art. *Kuda Binal* provided further opportunity to engage not only members of Darwin's Indonesian community but also a diverse cross-section of local artists, both professional and amateur. (Performed outdoors at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, *Kuda Binal* was also notable for pyrotechnics which were miraculous in somehow not incinerating a number of performers trapped inside a flaming dragon.)

The *Kuda Binal* project came about as a result of 24HR Art's characteristically opportunistic programming approach. The artist Heri Dono was presenting work at the Adelaide Festival when Steve Fox saw an opportunity for him to stop off in Darwin on his way home. By securing spontaneous in-kind support from Perkins Shipping (agreeing to freight the artist's work back to Indonesia) and the Indonesian Consulate (providing the set of expensive gamelans necessary for the performance work), 24 HR Art overcame what would otherwise have been insurmountable budget obstacles. Thelma John has described the processes involved in presenting this project:

We secure a loan of the Gamelan instruments from the Indonesian Consulate and the gallery is suddenly filled with gongs

and music and people... Heri unpacks his performance crate and out come gas masks, fire throwers, spray guns, toy guns, lanterns, masks, puppets, dragons. He decorates the gallery... The orchestra plays and 200 people pass through on Saturday. A week later we are digging holes in a lovely bit of lawn outside the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, installing huge bonfires and bamboo filled with kerosene... There are seventy volunteers credited on the program. These people have been thrown together and some of them are confused. I keep saying it is not theatre, it's performance art, don't worry, whatever you do is right. Just don't burn anyone!'

A significant aspect of the work and intent of Alan Rivera, Heri Dono and a number of other South-East Asian artists who have undertaken projects in Darwin is their deliberate embracing of indigenous traditions and materials. Steve Fox has commented upon the significance and relevance of this approach in relation to Australian art and culture:

What I find great with artists like Heri Dono and also Santiago Bose from the Philippines who recently worked in Darwin is the need to look into the roots of their own countries [sic] artforms and not to be heavily reliant on the West for the source and development of their work. At the same time, both bring in very new forms and combine these with older traditions... It seems to be a lot closer to what is happening particularly up here in the NT with the interest in Aboriginal art and life that is becoming a focus for many contemporary artists.<sup>6</sup>

Arnhem Land painter Djalu Gurrurwiwi further emphasises the value of this connection:

Yo. It's manyak [good] meeting together, working together, and help one another, from the heart, you know...<sup>7</sup>



Dadang Christanto *Reconciliation* 2000

1. Fiona Leibrick, 'A Silver Jubilee of Southeast Asian Art at the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory', *Cocoons, Kerosene, Culture (Darwin Southeast Asia Art Exchange)*, 24HR Art, 1994.
2. Judy Kean, 'Crossing the Moat', *Cocoons, Kerosene, Culture*.
3. Alan Rivera, 'Look Asian. Think Pilipino. Speak English. Reconciling Different Worlds', *Cocoons, Kerosene, Culture*.
4. Fiona Leibrick, essay in *Cocoons, Kerosene, Culture*.
5. Thelma John, 'Heri Dono in Darwin', *Cocoons, Kerosene, Culture*.
6. Steve Fox, 'A Response to Heri Dono's Performance — Kuda Binal', *Cocoons, Kerosene, Culture*.
7. Djalu Gurrurwiwi, artist's statement, *The Meeting of Waters*, catalogue, Australasian Print Project, NT University and 24HR Art, 1998.

# a (re)constructed **City**



Rosalie Gascoigne *Pink Window* from *100% TRACY* 1994



As a city Darwin is a complete construct. It's post-colonial. The whole city has been destroyed four times. It's very bizarre, very shifting, everything is on the edge all the time. There's a large transitory population. It's at the end of the hippy trail from South-East Asia. It's at the end of the longest stretch of straight road in the world and you get to the edge of that road and there's a hamburger shop selling crocodile burgers, camel burgers and buffalo burgers...<sup>1</sup>

In a region undergoing rapid redevelopment, there is the constant question of how to preserve cultural memory within an environment of constant erasure. In Darwin and, to a slightly lesser extent, some other parts of the Northern Territory, artists have repeatedly challenged the apparent indifference of developers and governments on this issue. In addition to projects relating to the physical sites occupied by 24HR Art itself, the organisation has also presented initiatives more broadly concerned with these issues of cultural memory and the built environment. Describing the concerns underlying the *Veneer* exhibition, Cath Bowdler wrote:

Darwin's physical and cultural history and extraordinary racial mix make it unique and precarious as the rate of change and development escalates... A refusal to engage with the...richness and diversity of this place will result in a loss of identity, supplanted by sameness, a mediocrity and a blandness that is at odds with this place and its people...

It seems as if the city is undergoing a process of irrevocable change; being made over in the image of a resort town as the cultural and physical rough edges are being smoothed over and smartened up for the tourist market. Things that made Darwin unique and interesting are being subsumed, cleaned up or 'moved on'...<sup>2</sup>



Judith Miller *The Parap Wall of Memory & Forgetting* 1994

It's at the  
end of the  
longest  
stretch of  
straight road  
in the world

supplanted  
by  
sameness,  
a  
mediocrity  
and a  
blandness



Cath Bowdler & Michiel Dolk *Veneer* 1998

Combining work by artists and architects, *Veneer* offered an intelligent critique on the character and identity of place, difficult issues characteristically ignored or glossed over within urban planning policies and dollar-driven design approaches.

This critiquing of radical redevelopment of the built environment is also evident in a show by Cynthia Mills titled *Year of Living Dangerously — Palmo '97*. Reflecting on rapid recent development in the satellite city of Palmerston, the exhibition was specifically focussed around the phenomenon of major shopping centre as de facto community centre, the materialistic focus of which becomes especially evident in the lead up to Christmas. The centre piece of the show was a large doona cover crocheted from plastic bags and festooned with junk mail and other shopping debris.

As its contribution to a program of events acknowledging the twentieth anniversary of Cyclone Tracy, 24HR Art presented a richly evocative project titled *100% TRACY*. Combining work by thirteen artists from around Australia, linked by their use of corrugated iron as a sculptural material, the project gave a complex, poetic and sometimes humorous resonance to the remembrance of one of the most extreme events in Australian history.

A vintage and characteristically understated work by the late Rosalie Gascoigne epitomised the qualities of *100% TRACY*. Writing about this piece, Steve Fox commented that:

...*Pink Window*, put together in 1975 almost stands as a symbol of the event. The iron wrapped over the window frame almost like an artefact created by Tracy itself giving off that eerie stillness following a storm. Also just maybe a reflection of what it must have felt like standing in the quiet aftermath in stunned disbelief moments after Tracy had passed, viewing a new landscape scattered with remnants of homes that had been there the day before.<sup>3</sup>

In Darwin for the opening of the exhibition, Gascoigne herself was quoted in the *Northern Territory News* as saying:

Corrugated iron is an elegant medium, it's classy and beautiful.<sup>4</sup>

(Incidentally, Gascoigne purchased another of the works included in the show, by Alice Springs artist Dan Murphy, and donated it to the collection of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.)

Kim Mahood, another artist in the exhibition, commented astutely upon the significance of corrugated iron in Australian culture:

The provisional usurps the permanent, and dictates its own imperatives.<sup>5</sup>

Judith Miller created a monumental installation in the middle of the Parap shopping area. *The Parap Wall of Memory and Forgetting* literally stopped people in their tracks, confronting them with ambiguous fragments from lives scattered and misplaced by the cyclone.

*100% TRACY* successfully engaged a large audience, including many cyclone survivors. Steve Fox recalls encountering some of these people weeping in the gallery, prompted to tell him their own traumatic recollections of the event. For them, the exhibition triggered deep emotions.

Gary Lee and Suzanne Spinner produced essays which lent valuable context to the broader commemoration of the cyclone and its subsequent impacts.

On the Christmas Eve twenty years ago, as my family and I huddled together in our tiny Housing Commission bathroom... I wondered about the Aboriginal families in their tin huts next door at Bagot community. In the morning they and their huts had completely disappeared. I wondered if the wind took them away too, and if anybody had bothered to find out what happened to them.<sup>6</sup>

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to them.

Here, our children sleep under corrugated iron and rotating fans, protected by flywire and horizontal shelves of glass held up by fibro walls clad in a new breed corrugated iron, more properly called custom orbe zinc alume.

They welcome the rain as I did and have never seen a cyclone.

Our children have never been to Sunday School but they know about the Rainbow Serpent and Lightning Man and his wife.<sup>7</sup>

The Northern Territory is also frequently reconstructed in glorious visions created largely by the tourist industry. The glamour of the place is marketed, packaged and sold through all manner of mythologised representations, a phenomenon addressed within a number of 24HR Art projects. A notable example was an installation by Lisa Beilby *...comes with the Territory*, an installation constructed with bright, pure pigments on the floor of the gallery, arranged in the shape of various hard-edged tourism icons. Navigating between this dense maze of clichés represented a major challenge for anyone entering the space.

The 24HR Art members' show pursued some similar themes in 1996. Titled *Ask a local: Tell a tourist where to go!* this event presented a range of images, objects and sentiments unlikely to be picked up and reproduced by the Northern Territory Tourist Commission.

In witnessing and commenting upon the perpetual making over and reconstruction of place and environment, all of these projects have encouraged an immensely valuable degree of discomfort, dissonance and critical reflection. They remind us that, behind the developers' facades, there's a wealth of real stories, histories and communities, and that these are indeed worth defending.

1. Interview with Chris Downie, *Eyeline* magazine, 1991.
2. Cath Bowdler, catalogue essay for *Veneer* 24HR Art, 1998.
3. Steve Fox, catalogue essay for *100% TRACY* 24HR Art, 1994.
4. Rosalie Gascoigne, quoted in article on *100% TRACY* exhibition in *Northern Territory News*, 17 December 1994.
5. Kim Mahood, artist's statement, *100% TRACY*, catalogue.
6. Gary Lee, 'Breath of the Serpent', *100% TRACY*, catalogue.
7. Suzanne Spinner, 'Corrugations — memory runs in ripples of even amplitude', *100% TRACY*, catalogue.

# A democratic institution

This is a town where you can participate in culture. Lawyers do play readings, health workers sing work songs in choirs, bikers make bush furniture and writers make visual statements. Audiences cross from one art form to another and artists and performers attend the shows of their peers.<sup>1</sup>

From its first year of operation, 24HR Art has presented an annual show with an open invitation for all its members to make and exhibit work. More than just a grab-bag or a dog's breakfast, these events have highlighted the vibrancy, diversity and good humour of artists from all over the Northern Territory and beyond.

Darwin artist Geoff Sharples commented on the virtue of this institution:

I [first] came across democracy in the art world with the 1978 Mildura Sculpture Triennial... If an artist considered he/she had a work of value, then they were invited to exhibit their work. 24HR Art's Members' show has the same democracy. Make a valued work and it is exhibited. Democracy is rare in the art world.<sup>2</sup>

During his term as Director of 24HR Art, Steve Fox vigorously promoted this concept of access and broad based participation:

One of my aims in life has always been to make Art as accessible to as wide an audience as possible, another is to remove any stigma that contemporary Art is there only for some elite group. In Darwin more than anywhere else I believe this stands true, there is no room for false elitism or pretensions, to follow that path is to invite disinterest and failure.

There is no other place in Darwin other than 24HR Art where Visual Art is presented in such a challenging manner yet still able to reflect on the community in which it is situated and at the same time maintain a welcoming presence.<sup>3</sup>



Chips Mackinoley  
*Road Signs of the Northern Territory 1998*



Rox de Luca Sorry 2000

In most cases, members' shows have been focussed around a given theme, encouraging a myriad of variously sharp, insightful, humorous, tangential, maverick and irreverent contributions from artists of all persuasions. The quality of some of these shows has been remarkable, not merely for their diversity and dynamism but also for their passionate and voracious dealing with the issue at hand. The themes associated with most of the exhibitions — dogs, tourism, the road, 'croc's' — have touched a receptive local nerve, prompting the creation and presentation of remarkable art and artefacts.

Darwin is a big town for dogs. You either love 'em or hate 'em, and people in the former category seem to be in the vast majority. For this reason, *The Dog Show* remains amongst the most legendary of 24HR Art events, attracting a phenomenal response from audience and artists alike. As Judy Kean recollects, the project brought together:

an astonishing range of canine manifestations in clay, driftwood, paint and many other forms.<sup>4</sup>

With characteristic flair, Thelma John described this exploration of the dog's place in Territory life as:

a debarkle of dogma addressing our (collective) dog fetish.<sup>5</sup>

Connected with this project was a display staged outside the gallery by the Darwin Dog Obedience Association, complete with alsatians jumping over flaming hurdles.

For many people, life in the Northern Territory seems to play out like some kind of road movie, and the exhibitions *Drive, she said* and *Road Trains to the Sea* both provided scope for the exploration of all manner of ideas pertaining to this rich cultural vein: white line fever; Toyota dreamings; dying young but pretty; the six slab journey; the truck driver's blues; and the vehicle window as framing device for visions of country. The scope of work included in these shows was remarkable. *Drive, she said* included a performance by Annie Gustin of a radio play by



*Therese Ritchie, Green Ant Research Arts & Publishing Coe 1997*

# Half-boy



## half-reptile

Years of rage pent up in his savage little heart!

Suzanne Spinner, bark paintings from East Arnhem Land, a sound piece by Mac Cocker, and a range of other artworks offering 'something for everyone — billy-carts to broken hearts, back seat drivers and armchair riders'.6

The 'croc' is a ubiquitous emblem of life in the Top End, the *Northern Territory News* managing to find some spurious excuse for a croc story on almost a daily basis. Croc stories and myths are constantly recycled and repeated, and no tourist's visit to Darwin is complete without a photograph taken alongside Sweetheart, a huge stuffed saurian on permanent display in the Museum. 24HR Art's *Croc Show*, presented in 1997, included all manner of inventive elaborations upon this overloaded theme. Once again, beautiful bark paintings from Arnhem Land hung beside a proliferation of work in other forms: crocs made from corrugated iron, soft sculpture, inflatable material, as well as live crocodiles gazing out in thick skinned, glassy eyed splendour from a temporary aquarium.

*Snakes and Serpents* saw the exhibition of 135 works of mixed pedigree, including glorious works by Aboriginal artists from Ernabella and Mutitjulu in the Centre, Munupi and Tiwi Designs to the north and Ramingining, Maningrida, Yirrkala and Beswick in Arnhem Land. Graham Gow from Territory Snake World was in the gallery on a regular basis, introducing various live exhibits. Non-indigenous artists including Rod Moss, Franck Gohier, Ingrid Gersmanis and Simone Letat contributed all manner of works, some menacing, some comical and some managing to be both at the same time.

Both the first and the most recent of 24HR Art's members' shows were focussed around the simple notion of 'ideal format'. Hundreds of small, universal canvas boards were distributed and subsequently returned, embellished in hundreds of different ways. *Ideal Format #10* contained more than 300 works, including miniature cross-hatched masterpieces from Ramingining, canvas boards adorned with salvaged fragments of demolished Darwin hotels, a multi-panel work by Chips Mackinolty titled *A Smaller Grand Canyon* (complete with due acknowledgment to David Hockney and the National Gallery of Australia), boards with pink satin horns protruding



from furry collars, an exquisitely painted vision of the ephemeral, rippling pulse of nature by Jacki Fleet and an affectionately painted, gently glowing cyber-icon by Trevor van Weeren.

Other years at 24HR Art have seen the presentation of members' shows focussed around self portraiture (*The Self Portrait Show* in 1993), tourism (*Ask a local — Tell a tourist where to go!* in 1996) and fin de siècle contemplations (*The Death of the Millennium* in 1999). These, too, have been remarkable multi-media events.

All of these members' shows from the first decade at 24HR Art have been lively projects. Various bands have performed, astrological charts have been cast, crocodiles and snakes have been let loose and dogs have jumped through hoops. Large numbers of gallery visitors, many of them new to 24HR Art, have been entertained, provoked, charmed and bemused, responding to the unlikely and unpredictable. Perhaps most significantly, the phenomenal liveliness, diversity and real-life engagement of artists from across the Northern Territory has been revealed again and again.



Trevor van Weeren *Immense* (detail) 1998

1. Thelma John, article in *Eyeline* magazine, 1994.
2. Geoff Sharples, artist's statement, *re-site*, catalogue, 24HR Art, 2000.
3. Steve Fox, Director's Report, 24HR Art Annual Report, 1994.
4. Judy Kean, Director's Report, 24HR Art Annual Report, 1992.
5. Thelma John, 'Top End Tale', *RealTime* magazine, 1994.
6. *Ibid.*



Anne Flynn *Contact Boy* 1995

## a big territory

Look, there are many different countries here within this place, many different language groups. Why do you expect us all to speak one language? ...there's many different languages, many different landscapes. |

24HR Art is chartered with a patently impossible brief to provide service across the entire Northern Territory. It's a big place: even allowing for the fact that there's no speed limit along most of the Stuart Highway and you can therefore drive as fast as you like (whilst watching out for wandering cattle), it's still a journey of some 1900 kilometres from Darwin to Uluru.

In spite of its small resource base, 24HR Art has worked in partnership with a range of organisations in order to deliver and support activities throughout the Territory. It has fostered connections with arts organisations in Arnhem Land, Central Australia and the Barkly Tablelands. Additionally, it has collaborated with interstate agencies such as the Kick Arts Collective in Cairns and Umbrella Studios in Townsville, facilitating artist exchanges and hosting touring exhibitions. Throughout 1998 and 1999, for example, these collaborations included working with Maningrida Arts & Crafts, Warlukurlangu Artists in Yuendumu, Julalikari Artists in Tennant Creek, Buku Larrngay Mulka Arts at Yirrkala, the YMCA at Palmerston and Watch This Space, an artist run initiative in Alice Springs.

24HR Art's association with Watch This Space dates from the establishment of the Alice Springs organisation in 1994. Although separated by 1500 kilometres and vastly different geography and climate, the relationship between the two has been significant and mutually valuable. Pam Lofts, the instigator and former coordinator of Watch This Space, sees the two organisations operating like allies in a foreign land called the Northern Territory. Several shows have been presented in both venues, and artists from either the Top End or the Centre have exhibited in the opposite locale. In addition to assisting the professional development of Central Australian artists, 24HR Art has also been able to extend administrative support, managing grants on behalf of Watch This Space until its incorporation in late 1999.

just building up  
for another  
big wet?

A key long-term collaborator for 24HR Art has been ARTBACK, one of a network of national exhibition touring support agencies. ARTBACK has picked up various 24HR Art projects, touring and presenting work in far-flung venues throughout the Territory. A tour of the exhibition *Against the Wind*, for example, took in Batchelor, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, before concluding in Melbourne.

The regular movement of artists in, out and across the Northern Territory means that 24HR Art is perpetually supporting the development of new artists. Writing in the catalogue for *ripe* — NT Emerging Artists exhibition, Cath Bowdler and Geraldine Tyson observe that:

There is a huge transient population of artists who come to the Territory, stay for a while and move on. So much so that often the act of 'emerging' here is synonymous with leaving and moving on...<sup>2</sup>

This transience also applies more generally to the Northern Territory populace, adding to the complexities inherent in building and maintaining a core audience. (About a third of the Territory's population is newly registered on the electoral rolls every three years.) At the same time, there is a positive aspect to this demographic phenomenon: the perpetual influx of new people ensures an ongoing dynamic, with artists, staff and Board members changing on a regular basis. Several significant figures in the history of 24HR Art have lived and worked in both the Centre and the Top End, bringing a broad based, informed perspective to the work of the organisation. Steve Fox and Pam Lofts currently contribute as regional advisers.

Most significantly, 24HR Art has consistently presented remarkable work from all parts of the Northern Territory, highlighting the diversity of landscape, language and culture across this huge region of Australia. Work by artists from the Centre has been shown alongside work from Darwin, Arnhem Land and the Tiwi Islands. Writing in connection with her installation *anxiety and desire*, Pam Lofts describes the quintessential desert experience:



Chris Barry *To Catch a Fire* (detail) 2000



Wendy Teakel *Surface Tension* Installation Detail 1995

Camp on the edge of a powdery lake embossed and crossed with cattle tracks. Flints and grinding stones silent now but speaking an earlier history. At night the stars multiply and fall out of the velvet black. Time and space distorts and stretches...

At the outstation a boy gallops around with a bit between his teeth and the women put on thick soled sandals. We go hunting with them, digging for yams. Digging huge holes for sand frogs. They now have a microwave. I wonder what setting for sand frogs?<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, Thelma John defines the character of a piece of work by Ramingining artist Dina Wirridji included in the *Cross Fibre* exhibition:

Sometimes there is a little proper neat weaving at the start but not for long, they go wild and loose, they are rough and raw and organic — untamed as well as dysfunctional... Something is lost in the translation and the objects are controlling their own destinies. Craft at its most threatening? Function replaced by form. Or just building up for another big wet?<sup>2</sup>

Viewing many of the exhibitions presented at 24HR Art, it's impossible not to learn something about the diversity of the Northern Territory, with its complex, interwoven cultures. Perhaps this point is made most succinctly by Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels, explaining the transient meaning of her work within a specific geographic context:

We will be doing that Ngapa dancing (water dance) at Mutitjulu after the exhibition, because we have made that milpingi (woven spinifex) for Darwin.<sup>3</sup>

1. Djon Mundine, quoted in papers from *Wijay Na...? forum*, 24HR Art, 1998.
2. Cath Bowdler & Geraldine Tyson, catalogue essay for *ripe* — NT Emerging Artists, 24HR Art, 1999.
3. Pamela Lofis, Pamela Lofis — *anxiety desire and coolamon*, catalogue, 24HR Art, 1997.
4. Thelma John, article in *Eyefine* magazine, 1995.
5. Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels, *Nyurruuyi, Nyurruuyi, Long Time Ago*, catalogue, 24HR Art, 1996.

# Beyond the gallery walls

More than just a lively white box, the scope of activity presented and supported by 24HR Art has consistently extended beyond the confines of the gallery space. Off-site projects have been a significant aspect of the organisation's work. These have included exhibitions presented in other venues, outdoor performance events, critical forums, lectures and workshops, as well as networking, advocacy and promotional activities.

Operating in a region not blessed with an abundance of arts infrastructure, 24HR Art inevitably covers a lot of ground. Unlike Australia's other capital cities, there's no Artworkers' Alliance or Artists' Foundation, no Arts Law or ViScope office, no public art brokerage agencies. 24HR Art has worked hard to fill this void by providing advice and referrals, responding as much as possible to demands for assistance from local artists and organisations, as well as from curators, gallery owners and researchers from elsewhere.

24HR Art has consistently worked in collaboration with other agencies in order to undertake many projects which have been clearly outside the scope of its own resources. It's a good team player. For example, 24HR Art worked with the Darwin Entertainment Centre to set up what became known as artsMARK, an arts marketing consortium comprising a diverse range of cultural agencies, working together to maximise promotion of current and forthcoming activities. It has also undertaken long-term work in partnership with Darwin City Council and Brown's Mart Community Arts to develop a public art register and to define and promote opportunities for artists to work on public and community art projects.

24HR Art's involvement with public art initiatives stretches back to 1991 when it was instrumental in securing a role for an artist in the planning and redevelopment of the Darwin Port precinct. The organisation has subsequently helped to promote a growing interest and commitment to public art activity on the part of various local, corporate and publicly funded organisations. Increasingly called upon to assist in sourcing artists for public and community art projects, it has supported the engagement of local artists working in this sphere. A notable instance was support given for the highly successful *Sculpture by the Sea* event, involving over a dozen local artists and staged as part of the Olympics Arts Festival *A Sea Change* in 1998.



Winsome Jobling *Dress Ups* Installation Detail 1996

As part of a national network of contemporary art organisations (CAOs), 24HR Art has been able to source information and disseminate it across the Territory. The organisation has also supported occasional Territory-wide initiatives. Notably, these have included a series of regional arts law forums in 1998, and the assisted presentation of emerging artists' exhibitions in a number of remote regions during the same year. This latter project involved the staging of an exhibition of work from the Barkly Region in Tennant Creek and Borrooloola, in addition to an exhibition of prints by women artists from Maningrida, staged at the Northern Territory University Gallery.

An especially notable project undertaken outside the gallery was *Inside Art/Out*, located inside the Darwin Correctional Centre and resulting in an exhibition at the Raintree Gallery. 24HR Art won funding for this project through a national tendering process and commissioned local artist Franck Gohier and a group of respected older Aboriginal artists, as tutors, to conduct workshops with Aboriginal prisoners from various regions of the Territory. Summarising the objectives of this project, Steve Fox wrote that:

The aim...was to pilot a program in those locations with the highest incarceration levels to assist prisoners through the medium of visual arts to claim, control and enhance their cultural inheritance...<sup>1</sup>

A significant flow on from this project — and a testimony to its success — has been the ongoing development of an art workshop program at the NT Correctional Centre, as well as the extension of the program to Alice Springs.

Probably the most ambitious off-site project undertaken was *Wijay Na...?*, a two day forum staged at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Bringing together a remarkable group of artists, curators, critics, academics, administrators and activists from around the country, the forum addressed important but difficult cross-cultural issues. Marcia Langton, who co-chaired the event, argued that this discourse had been avoided for too long:

Somewhat in fear of the political correctness debate and somewhat through lack of a discourse. So we felt that Darwin as the critical centre of fine art, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists at least



*Inside Art/Our* participant 1996

Highlighting the connection between art and social context, Geraldine Tyson recalls the coincidence of the Next Multimedia Symposium with the arrival of East Timorese refugees into Darwin in October 1999. The media access area of the Symposium was extended to members of the East Timorese community

...cross and intercultural collaboration; the politics of access and equity in a 'cyber-global' community where only 12% of the world population is connected [to the internet]; intellectual property implications for artists engaged in digital media; cyberfeminist practices; funding and resourcing for creative practice in new media and the adaption and up-take of communications technologies in indigenous communities;

Focussed around the work of artists from a range of disciplines who utilise new communication technologies in challenging and innovative ways, the event prompted critical debate around many issues. These included:

...local, national and international presenters (artists, programmers, activists, industry representatives and politicians) to join with delegates to explore and interrogate the social, political, industry development and production implications of working with new media technologies;

In 1999, 24HR Art collaborated with QANTM NT Co-operative Multimedia Centre to stage Next, the Northern Territory's first multi-media symposium. A five day event spread over eight venues, Next drew together:

The published proceedings from *Why? Na...?* constitute a valuable resource, revealing background and problematising our readings of work by a diverse range of artists.

...speak to each other through their work, should be the centre of a dialogue where we discuss this interface and overcome the silence and confusion of our relationships;



so that they could maintain connections to others in the diaspora. The symposium's critical exploration of new media technologies was suddenly given a greater social and political immediacy.

A current project intended for forums outside and beyond 24HR Art's own gallery space is an ambitious touring exhibition titled *Art Markers — Aboriginal Heritage, a History to be Shared*. Being developed in partnership with the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, the project is drawing together a diverse range of artefacts associated with land rights and native title, seeking to commemorate the achievements and struggles of Aboriginal peoples over the past thirty years. An implicit intention of the project is to highlight the way in which art has been utilised by Aboriginal people as a key tool in their efforts to win back traditional lands.

*Two Laws... One Big Spirit*, a unique cross-cultural dialogue between Rusty Peters and Peter Adsett, highlights 24HR Art's commitment to reconciliation through art. The artists painted together for 14 days, each painting seven canvases in response to the one before. The resulting show of stunning paintings is the first major show developed by 24HR Art to tour nationally. The show and associated corroboree have been taken by NETS Australia, through ARTBACK. After premiering in Darwin the show will tour to major galleries around the country.



*Two Laws Closing Performance*,  
performed by Neminuwarlin Dance Group 2000  
(Photo Bronwyn Wright)

1. Steve Fox, catalogue essay for *Inside Art/Out* at Raintree Gallery, Darwin, 1996.
2. Marcia Langton, quoted in proceedings from *Wijay Nit...?* forum, 24HR Art, 1998.
3. Geraldine Tyson, Director's Report, 24HR Art Annual Report, 1999.
4. *ibid.*

# 10

years & beyond  
(looking forward)

Summarising 24HR Art's 1998 program, Geraldine Tyson identifies the following range of issues and preoccupations:

The programming explored the polemics and issues surrounding a sense of place, urban environments, spirituality, identity, cultural displacement, issues of Aboriginality and reconciliation, feminism and new technologies.<sup>1</sup>

This is a large terrain. In continuing to traverse it, the 1999 program included fourteen in-house exhibitions, two off-site exhibitions and one performance event, an artist in residence project and a major symposium. Two hundred artists and community groups were involved in this program, and audience numbers exceeded 9000 people, a proportion of whom had no previous association with 24HR Art.<sup>2</sup>

Where does 24HR Art go from here? Micheline Yoke Yean Lee asks:

Should we have a stronger kinship with many of our counterparts interstate by showing more conceptually driven art reflecting the national trends in art practice? Do we retain our strong community focus and unique Territorian mix exploring issues surrounding a sense of place and identity?<sup>3</sup>

There are other questions that might be asked, too. For example, should 24HR Art seek to undertake more projects outside the confines of the gallery space? Is the gallery itself in need of significant redesign and redevelopment so that it's better equipped to present more technically demanding exhibitions? How can the organisation more effectively promote the work of local artists within a bigger arena, extending beyond the Northern Territory? How can it help to generate a more articulate critical environment? What can be done to better engage casual gallery visitors so that they're not alienated by art which defies their expectations? Through its largest funded project to date, 24HR Art has recently undertaken a major audience evaluation study, seeking to inform and develop answers to these questions in the publication *Breaking the Frame*.

# an Emporium for diverse objectives

As a chronic over-achiever, 24HR Art is perpetually in danger of becoming a victim of self-generated expectations. In a context where government funding seems frozen at current levels and where there's only a relatively small community from which to extract further sponsorship and support, the organisation is limited in its capacity to take on additional programs and functions. The scope of its ambitions is huge, a reflection of the organisation's precocious history. There is no apparent limit to the scope of possibilities: there are so many ideas to pursue and opportunities to be exploited.

Building on the efforts of astrologer Carolyn Wilkinson, a participant in *The Death of the Millennium* members' exhibition, there are many people prepared to cast a chart for 24HR Art's future. Wendy Cowan stresses the importance of 24HR Art maintaining itself as a 'warm space, not an ice-box', while Geoff Sharples' focus is on the value of regular events outside of the gallery. Franck Cohier asks that a genuinely broad and diverse range of work be presented, always challenging dominant modes of practice. Barbara Pitman would like to believe that the organisation will remain canny enough not to be captured by any clique or dominant interest group. Penny Campton hopes that programming will reflect a sharp-edged political engagement, whereas Theo Tremblay wishes only that 24HR Art should remain 'an emporium for diverse objectives'. Judith Miller suggests that 24HR Art is a dynamic artwork in itself, that it is never locked into a fixed format and is always prepared to take risks as it evolves from one phase into another.<sup>4</sup>

Chris Downie, 24HR Art's inaugural Director, observes that Darwin's distinct geographic and cultural position create obvious opportunities for unique projects. Arnhem Land, Jakarta and Singapore are closer than Sydney or Melbourne. In spite of this, he now feels that, looking nationally, contemporary art spaces have probably passed their use-by date as effective and relevant cultural agencies. He suggests that a new concept is needed in order to respond to an increasingly diverse range of artistic practices.<sup>5</sup>



Brian Ash *Kampung Darwin* Installation Detail 2000

Refuting this notion, 24HR Art continues to extend itself in order to do all manner of things: to accommodate projects by Northern Territory artists, established and emerging; to present stimulating and provocative shows from other parts of the country; to consolidate and extend connections with South-East Asian artists and communities; to further debate and extend appreciation of diverse indigenous cultural practice; and to support the development of local artists and audiences through its own initiatives and through collaborative endeavours with other agencies. It continues to conscript new devotees and spectators as people keep coming to Darwin and other parts of the Territory from all over the place.

It keeps promising the unpredictable, maintaining a style which is dynamic but not overly slick. What else can it possibly do?

1. Geraldine Tyson, Director's Report, 24HR Art Annual Report, 1998.
2. 24HR Art Annual Report, 1999.
3. Micheline Yoke Yean Lee, Chairperson's Report, 24HR Art Annual Report, 1998.
4. Interviews undertaken for this publication, March-April 2000.
5. Interview with Chris Downie, April 2000.

## 24HR Art — Staff & Board members

Staff: Chris Downie (Director 1990–91), Elizabeth O'Shea (Administrator 1991), Thelma John (Administrator 1991–92, Acting Director 1993, Assistant Director 1993–96), Judy Kean (Director 1991–93), Brian Ash (Acting Administrator 1993), Steve Fox (Director 1993–96), Jackie Wurm (Assistant Director 1996–), Geraldine Tyson (Director 1996–99), Cath Bowdler (Director 2000–).

Board members: Christine Colton, Barbara Pitman, Winsome Jobling, Geoff Sharples, Thelma John, Franz Ehmann, Bob Anderson, Margie West and Deborah Humphries (1991); David Allen, Suzanne Spinner, Therese Ritchie, Elizabeth O'Shea, Markus Spazzapan, Bilha Smith, Aengus Munro, Fiona Leibrick, Wendy Attenborough, Dallas Gold, Julie Sutherland and Jane Graham (1992); Alison Laycock, Suzanne Spinner, Therese Ritchie, Markus Spazzapan, Elizabeth O'Shea, Cath Bowdler, Dallas Gold, Marie McMahon, Mark Elliot Ranken, Fiona Leibrick and David Allen (1993); Alison Laycock, Dallas Gold, Cath Bowdler, Rob Allen, Marie McMahon, Cheryl Marchetti, Suzanne Spinner, Dawn Mendham, Annie Taylor, Kate Monger, Christine Lennard, Fiona Leibrick, Aileen Moyle, Chris Moyle, Therese Ritchie, Markus Spazzapan and Mark Elliot Ranken (1994); Jackie Wurm, Marie McMahon, Cheryl Marchetti, Kate Monger, Cath Bowdler, Dawn Mendham, Judith Christian Miller, Yvonne Sorensen, Annie Taylor and Dallas Gold (1995); Cath Bowdler, Judith Christian Miller, Kate Monger, Micheline Yoke Yean Lee, Lizard, Jo Russavage, Erica Izett, Caroline Lieber, Daena Murray (formerly Dawn Mendham), Denise Officer, Yvonne Sorensen, Rob Allen, Marie McMahon, Cheryl Marchetti, Annie Taylor, Dallas Gold, Basil Hall, Brian Ash and regional adviser Pam Lofts (1996); Denise Officer, Lisa Beilby, Christine Colton, Micheline Yoke Yean Lee, Melanie Little, Jo Russavage, Basil Hall, Penny Campton, Lorraine Davies, Roland Koch-Laurie, Caroline Lieber, Cath Bowdler, Judith Christian Miller, Kate Monger, Daena Murray, regional advisers Pam Lofts and Steve Fox (1997); Micheline Yoke Yean Lee, Denise Officer, Melanie Little, Kevin Banbury, Robert Tormey, Lisa Beilby, Christine Colton, Suzanne Gibson, Roland Koch-Laurie, Jo Russavage, Chris White, Basil Hall, Penny Campton, Lorraine Davies, Caroline Lieber, regional advisers Pam Lofts and Steve Fox (1998); Wendy Cowan, Roland Koch-Laurie, Chris White, Chris Howse, Toni Vine Bromley, Robert Tormey, Brian Ash, Emma Heughan, Karen Mills, Jane Palmer, Trevor van Weeren, Erica Izett, regional advisers Pam Lofts and Steve Fox (1999); Cathy Laudenbach, Trevor van Weeren, Julie Milton, Kirsty Gowans, Toni Vine Bromley, Wendy Cowan, Robert Tormey, Carmel Young, Vanessa McRae, Dallas Gold and Karen Nevill (2000).

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This could only happen in Darwin...

Born in a crumbling, disused petrol station and  
reincarnated some years later in an old cinema,  
24HR Art is now a ten year phenomenon.

This publication celebrates ten years of  
contemporary art practice in the Northern  
Territory by exploring the distinct character of  
24HR Art and revisiting a diverse range of  
projects which have defined its aspirations,  
preoccupations and achievements.