

OPEN 5

## Bitumen River

Bitumen River Gallery was started by accident in many ways. The actual space was a derelict shelter shed for an infants school that is no longer in existence in Manuka, one of the wealthier suburbs in Canberra.

A concerned citizen became annoyed at the derelict state of the building and wrote to her local member of parliament suggesting that the building be used by unemployed people as a shopfront for the activities that they were involved in. The minister in turn contacted Jobless Action, an organisation in Canberra working with unemployed people, asking if they were interested in using the space. At the same time Megalo Screenprint Workshop needed an outlet for the posters that were being produced there and together with Jobless Action decided to take on the space as a shopfront for posters and products made by people working in the CYSS centres.

Extensive building work was undertaken which involved putting in doors and windows, replacing sections of the floor and having an electricity pole put in, the Department of Capital Territory covering the expense of the latter item. Along the line it was decided that the space could be used more efficiently as a gallery space. The main reasons for this were that there were not enough people involved to be able to staff a shop, and it was thought that it would be the exhibiting artists responsibility to look after the gallery for the duration of her/his show. This development caused a split in the collective, which was small to begin with, as a number of people did not consider artists to be unemployed. However, the building became a gallery, with the collective made up of people from Megalo, and a couple of art students, with administrative help from Jobless Action.

The first show, an exhibition of screenprinted posters, entitled 'Bill Posters Appreciated', opened on April 4, 1981. At this time there was no real conception as to how the gallery was going to operate, to the point of not knowing what the next exhibition was going to be, and a number of problems began to surface.

The first problem was money. Along with one condition of not being in competition with any of the shops in the Manuka shopping complex, the Department of the Capital Territory made an unwritten stipulation that the gallery should be independent of government funding in return for the space being rent free. Also the prevailing attitude at the time was one of disregard for the visual arts and a complete ignorance of visual art activity in Canberra. The second problem was that after the first three to four exhibitions the collective had dropped to two people, Paul Ford and myself with occasional helpers. The maintenance of the gallery was far more work than had been imagined and unfortunately the expectation of being able to supplement incomes from the small commissions on sales did not eventuate, the gallery was running on low energy and money for a long time.

Several very good and important exhibitions happened that year. The Foundry, which is a CYSS project, mounted an exhibition in protest against the threatened CYSS cuts. The exhibition gained wide media coverage, to the extent of being on Nationwide

(ABC TV) and made the public aware of the work that was being done in the CYSS centres. Megalo had an end of year poster exhibition which gave the local government proof of the service that Megalo was providing the local community. The gallery also set a precedent by having an exhibition of work by three undergraduate students at the Canberra School of Art. The exhibition was entitled 'Names Withheld', showing work by Mark Denton, Julia Church and Cassie Moulen. The Art School at the time had not formulated a policy on undergraduates exhibiting outside of the school, although there was a lot of opposition to it at the time. However, the opposition was quelled by the positive response to the exhibition and the favourable reviews. Most of the one person shows at the gallery are by recent graduates or undergraduates of the Canberra School of Art.

The gallery continued to run its course with no real policy except that the gallery was totally open access and that the work would not be exhibited if it was sexist or racist. Actually the policy was one of non-policy. It was thought that the gallery should be totally flexible, able to change into whatever the individual or group wanted it to be. The two people administering the gallery did not think of themselves as gallery directors, and wanted no say in how the gallery should or shouldn't operate. The gallery however was gaining a reputation of its own, described several times in the local newspaper as punk, an inappropriate description but also described as exciting, contemporary and necessary for Canberra's cultural life.

Towards the middle of 1982 energy was extremely low, money was tight (fund raising efforts had been rather dismal) and it was decided that the gallery needed to have a proper working collective if it was going to survive.

An application for a grant to employ a co-ordinator was submitted to the Department of the Capital Territory Community Development Fund, and a general meeting was called encouraging people to be involved in the gallery, under threat of closure. The meeting attracted 25-30 people, which was heartening, the situation that the gallery faced was explained and a collective was formed. The grant application was approved and a co-ordinator, Alison Alder, was appointed. The main role of the co-ordinator, aside from doing the administrative work, is to keep the collective active and to delegate work. A newsletter has started, as well as a membership drive to inject funds into the gallery's coffers.

The gallery is also hoping to broaden its activities, at the moment some emphasis is being put on group theme shows, and also exchange exhibitions. More and more artists are becoming involved and taking an active part in the activities of the gallery. Poster sales were and still are an important aspect of the gallery's activities and in many ways are the gallery's bread and butter money. The influence of Jobless Action has diminished, mainly due to J.A.'s philosophy of making its project independent of its administration.

Alison Alder