

The privilege of occupying space

Simone Penkethman reflects on Skills Caravan 3, 14 May 2022 at Tuggeranong Arts Centre

A metaphorical caravan journeys through spaces where we as artists can connect, collaborate, find inspiration and support. The Skills Caravan has been popping up in arts centres across Canberra, bringing local artists together as part of the University of Canberra's Creative Recovery and Resilience Forum. In mid-May, the final Caravan focused on emerging artists with a connection to Canberra's south.

In the valley

My journey begins with a drive through Canberra's autumn splendour and the striking vista of the Brindabellas to Tuggeranong Arts Centre. TAC sits in a well-developed lakeside precinct with a community centre, library, and secondary college. These places have their own history. As we mill around on the ground floor, I swap memories with strangers about the experiences we've had within a few hundred metres of where we stand.

The first session is in a glass space upstairs that feels a bit like a ship, majestic over the lake, but also homey and a bit rundown. It's called the Lodge and it's decorated with plush stuffed animals and old-style furniture.

Proud local

Ruth O'Brien, our presenter, is at home in the Lodge. She is from Tuggeranong and first became involved with the arts in this place. Framed by the autumn leaves outside, Ruth's gentle presence belies her strong advocacy for the arts and disability community that draws on her lived experience in her discussion session 'Access all round'.

Ruth says we can move around if sitting still is not our comfort zone. Even though I stay still, I appreciate her acknowledging invisible difference.

Ruth talks about a social model of disability rather than a medical one. She encourages us to remember that people have their own ways of managing the medical side of their disability. What they need from their fellow humans is an understanding that the world is not built to suit everyone. The lived experience of many people with disability is to be socially excluded by physical, sensory, and other barriers.

Addressing these issues requires more than having a budget line and ticking boxes. Ruth encourages organisers to bring people with disability into spaces before an event. Issues around accessibility requirements that might be arguable on paper become very clear in the tangible world.

We all share stories of having accessibility issues highlighted for us by the people most affected. My story was about exhibiting the work of an artist who is a wheelchair user. He helped me realise that our gallery labels were placed too high on the wall to be comfortably read by anyone but a standing adult.

What I saw on our walk

After the talking comes the walking, led by Cross-Sector Engagement Artist in Residence for UC and Belco Arts, Kirsten Wehner. Kirsten has a passion for exploring and transforming people's inter-relationships with the non-human world (by which she means the rest of the natural world). She leads us to the lake, suggesting that we stay quiet and look down at the details on the ground rather than staring out at the vista, as western art and design traditions would have us do.

Kirsten gives us small cards to write down five observations. Here are mine:

- Fisherman in oilskin playing incongruous hip-hop
- Twigs and plastic bottles congregate in a hard corner of the lake
- On the bridge, with my back to the road, I hear traffic but see no cars: just the vista
- People and non-people flourishing
- All the young dudes fishing under the bridge

Later, we all buzz around a large table, pinning our cards onto a calico map of the lake that Kirsten pre-prepared.

Day dancing

Back on the ground floor of the arts centre, an 11-year-old boy is off in the corner of the room with a laptop and headphones. The music is beautiful, clean and sophisticated. I walk up to him and ask about the tunes. He tells me he composed and produced all the tracks himself using GarageBand. You can follow [Ghos7 on Soundcloud](#).

As the mother of a now grown-up child with similar skills and interests, I know how much this chance to play can mean for a young producer. People move around the space, some dancing, others chatting or eating delicious food. It's loose and friendly and fun.

Artist 101 lab: I don't even know what this is supposed to be about but I'm so here for it

We're back upstairs in the glass ship. Miriam Slater and Ketura Budd are leading the final session. They're both movers and shakers, doers and makers in the local live performance scene. Miriam performs comedy and physical theatre and their work is often concerned with Queer identity, representation, and community. Ketura is a producer and arts administrator extraordinaire.

The conversation is open and empathic, everyone is listening, and everyone has something to say. Here are my takeaways:

- Everyone's terrified of networking; it's better when connection is accidental.
- Talking about yourself as a product is not easy.
- Sprint and burnout, rinse and repeat.
- The expectation of continuum is vexing.
- Downtime is human.

- Creative people and executive disfunction means you have to trick your brain. Tell that brain, “You only have to do this for five minutes,” but at the end of five minutes you’re in the flow and your brain wants to keep going.
- Do the smallest version.
- Do something poorly then make it better.
- Artists need producers.
- You can be an artist and a producer but not both on the same project.
- When things are tough, check in with your project managers and funding bodies and ask for what you need. Maybe you’ll make it better for someone coming after you.