

NAVA: in conversation, Episode One

[Introduction Music]

Voiceover: The National Association for the Visual Arts is the peak body protecting and promoting the professional interests of the Australian visual arts. NAVA: in Conversation is a series exploring the issues and challenges of working in the sector. We speak with artists, curators and administrators to gain insight into the experiences of contemporary practice and seek to propose ideas for change, progress and resilience in both local and global contexts.

Brianna Munting: Hi, I'm Brianna Munting and I am the Deputy Director of NAVA. And for this episode we are at Cementa17 and we're speaking with artists and curators about their experience in regional NSW. Cementa is a biennial contemporary arts festival that takes place in Kandos, a small regional town located between Lithgow and Mudgee in Central West NSW. The region provides the back top to which artists make, exhibit and perform work relating to the social, historical or environmental context of the town and its surroundings. Cementa17 is four days and nights of performance, sound, cabaret, interactive and electronic arts, video, installation and ceramics that are presented at more than 20 venues in and around the town of Kandos.

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Brianna Munting: In this podcast we chat with Ian Milliss, Co-Director of the Kandos School of Cultural Adaptation on the responsibility of artists in making change, Aleshia Lonsdale on being an artist and working as an Aboriginal Arts Development Officer at Arts OutWest, artist Nicole Welch on living regionally, artist and academic Sarah Waterson about recreating a climate from Borneo in a hot house in Kandos, and finally Ann Finegan, one of the Co-Directors and founders of the Cementa festival. Please be aware that this was recorded in Kandos, on site with many of the artists which included in gallery spaces, nearby parks or cars so there's often background and ambient noise directly from the streets of Kandos to you.

[Music]

Ian Milliss: Who actually is an artist? That's not necessarily the people who make stuff, make product and content for the art world. It's people who actually generate cultural change.

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Ian Milliss: I am Ian Mills, I started out painting big geometric abstraction in the 60s, but then went very quickly into conceptual art and then by about 1971 or 72 I was basically doing what was an early version of social practice where I worked with community groups, individuals and recruited people to act out my work or, in fact, slowly it turned into real life stuff which involved working with community groups and green vans and trade unions and inner city urban activism. As much as being political activism, it was also cultural activism, it was about making things that change people's ideas about how the world worked, you know, which is the prelude to political change really, and legal change, and so it was always focused on the sort of cultural side of it. I didn't make works of art of it. I worked, I used artist's skills to work with people and produced things which generated, you know, worked in terms

political campaigns. So when I was asked to do stuff for Kandos it partly grew out of work I had done in other country towns like Lithgow, and it was out of the frustration of some of that stuff. You know, how to you actually make different sorts of country towns in a time of climate crisis, and so I basically invented a different Kandos and made a publicity poster for a Kandos that didn't exist, and everything on that poster existed, it just didn't exist in Kandos, and included things like a University, a Kandos University, which had a School of Cultural Adaptation to work out innovative ways of dealing with climate change and industry problems, you know, all of that whole range of issues we are facing. And that poster was around everywhere during the 2013 one and still now, three to four Cementas later it is still around everywhere. It's actually up on the street there now, you know, as we talk. And the bit in the middle, the School of Cultural Adaptation, various people like Gilbert Grace really picked up on that idea and wanted to make some of the things that were in it, as his artworks, and slowly we developed a group, a whole group around it, and that group has been doing a whole range of work including Futurelands which is the action, the thing that happens in the alternate years to Cementa and it is much less focused on art, even though it involves artists. It's much more focused on farmers and the local community and the regional, the really local regional community.

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Ian Milliss: The first one, which had about 15 people at it, was about artists working with coal mine activists, anti-coal mine activists, the second one which was about farming had 200 or more people at it, and could have had another 200 people at it because it got completely booked out really quickly, and went for two days instead of two hours like the first one, and was a major, major event, and so we've got a newspaper, a 50 page newspaper of simply all the discussions that went on at that. And that was about reinventing concepts of agriculture basically, how you integrate radical agriculture and radical ecology with traditional Aboriginal practices and whole range of economic and ecological and philosophical issues that we basically have to face at this point in time. We basically tried to redefine agriculture and we did it with, it wasn't the art world that did it, we did it with farmers, you know, we did it with radical farmers and radical ecological thinkers and with people who, whose job was to fund and promote innovative businesses and so you know it was really large scale, real world stuff, so a fair way away from normal art. Particularly places like Kandos are microcosms of all of those problems, you might think it is just a country town, but it is an industrial country town, you know, it is a one industry industrial town, that is why it exists, it exists in a rural environment. And, I mean, I went to live near Lithgow for 10 years partly because, well I could choose that place because I had spent some of my childhood there, and had relatives there and knew the area, but the reason I chose to do it was, I thought if you are going to actually fight climate change and so on you actually have a responsibility for the people who, actually their lives are based on climate change. You know they are coal miners, they are real people, and they have their own needs and they have families and they have to live, so if you are going to argue against all of that, for obviously very valid reasons, you also have to figure out how you are going to make the transition, and how you are going to help those people make the transition, and so these country towns which are dependent on things like coal mining or other forms of mining that are problematic, you need to go there, and you don't go there and suggest that they should become artists, you know that's not the deal, but you go there and you try and, you know, work out, use your skills to try help generate other stuff and help lead discussion in various ways, the stuff that they mightn't know of, you know, and sometimes you get a well deserved punch in the face because the fact that they know far more than you, so you shouldn't be arrogant about it, but you can bring in elements that they don't know. And that's the responsibility you have you've got to actually bring everyone

along with you that you can, so these are the places you come to, to do it. The best thing you can do in some ways, and I mean, and the Kandos School illustrated, that you start with just one little idea and one or two people talking about something, and it turns into a movement, and Futurelands has become a movement, and the Kandos School is still like 6 or 7 people but it could be other people if they want to come and join in, we just basically brand the things we do with it. We don't control each other or anything like that. But we sponsor various things like Futurelands and then people go and do it of their own accord. Forget that you even had anything to do with triggering it off, which is the ideal, you know, that these things just become a thing of their own, develop a life of their own, and the whole, there has been a hell of a lot of stuff around radical farming and needs change farming practices but we have been able to produce a version of it, which I think will generate a lot of further discussions and might actually trigger some really serious action.

[Music]

Ian Mills: Oh, artists don't have any responsibility, you know it's like, in a sense the responsibility of artists is to be irresponsible, you know, I mean I tend to not think of artists in that sort of sense, just say look, anyone actually being culturally innovative is an artist, you know, whether they call themselves an artist or not. You have to actually play at everything, you have to have every crazy idea you can have, you actually get everything you can think of a run no matter how silly, because sometimes the really silly ideas turn out to be the ones that have actually got the solution buried in them, somewhere inside them is the solution to a whole lot of things. And so, it is about that sort of creative play but it is also about real world results, you know you've actually got to do things, you know, get things out there, do them, see how they play out, you know, and hopefully you know, you have some result on things and you influence things. It could take years and years and years, it was 38 years before, between my proposed agriculture exhibition and it actually happening, you know, it can take a long time. And you basically, in a sense, you are often faced with: do you want a standard art world career, or do you actually want to do something real? That's the problem you can run into as a result of it. Doing something real might actually lock you out of a standard art world career but it is probably, well I always think it's a good thing to do, even if it is harder, so that's your responsibility, be wild and reckless and waste your life, you know, behave badly, you know, upset everyone, you know, behave as badly as possible.

[Music]

Aleshia Lonsdale: For me it's being able to give a voice to what I'm feeling and thinking but also to do that for other people as well.

[Music]

Aleshia Lonsdale: My name is Aleshia Lonsdale and I'm a Wiradjuri woman from Mudgee in Central West NSW and I'm a visual artist, and the work I predominately have been doing is in installation and sculpture. So, my day job is an Aboriginal Arts Development Officer for Arts OutWest which is a regional arts board. So that's really good because I get to travel across the region and work with the artists and communities and support them. It's a fantastic job and the network is really something that I think for regional artists is important. So a day next week is driving to Condobolin to take back works to the women's group out there. So they have a sister shed that does weavings and they've had an exhibition down at our gallery space at Hartley, so I curate that as well as part of my job, so next week I'm taking back what they didn't sell, so going for a day trip to Condo. There was three works that I did, they're

actually at the Rylstone Community Arts Centre at the moment, so it's timed well that it works in Cementa. So one of the works was, it's call *Exposed* and its looking at identity and how for Aboriginal people their identity is put up there as this, I guess, false idol that it's the only thing that makes you who you are and sometimes it can be very confronting that people are sort of hung out to dry, it just put on that. Another work was *Renew*, it was looking at that we all face challenges and things that affect us, but they kind of shape who we are, and if it wasn't for those things we wouldn't be who we are. So, I looked at the scribbly gum and how that has all of those marks from insects but also that eucalypts like drop their bark, so it's basically fabric which has, like, the markings of the scribbly and then it's got the fallen bark at the base of it. And then the third work, I wanted to something that kind of wasn't around identity, because I don't think Aboriginal artists just need to focus on Aboriginal specific issues, like just being in a box all the time, so I actually looked at deforestation across the world. So for me I know that something that I do is, that I use my artwork to say things that I may not be able to say necessarily verbally, you know whether you know talking about coal mining, cause you can't really sit the table with the mining company, and they don't want to hear that. But I guess using my artwork is another way to say it, and then even down to, so for instance I did some work that was about kids in the out of home care system. So I'm a carer for my sisters kids and it's not a culturally safe space, when you are just a carer, to be able to say what you necessarily think, so for me, I couldn't say what I thought, but I could show that through my artwork, and that was really interesting because I didn't put any wall text to explain the work, but it was interesting to see when people came in that were kinship carers like me, they got the work straight away. They were like that's, I totally get that, that's exactly how I feel, so for me it's being able to give a voice to what I'm feeling and thinking but also to do that for other people as well.

[Music]

Aleshia Lonsdale: I think the biggest challenges are access, so whether that's access to information, access to opportunities, access to good internet and mobile coverage, that's a really big thing too. I notice that with Cementa, that was put on their Twitter feed, you know, that if you haven't got Telstra or Optus you won't have phone service. People don't often understand that, but that's yeah, it can really have an impact. I think being isolated from other artists, particularly that are doing contemporary work is another challenge as well. And probably the perception that there's not a vibrant arts community out here. For me it's not, you're not in that rat race, you don't have those other distractions and I think for me, for a lot of my work, and the artists that I work with, they get a lot of their inspiration from being on country and maintaining their connection to country, and you know, whether that's down to the materials that they use or the issues that we face. So for my work we live in an area that's got major coal mining as an industry and so you can draw inspiration from that because it's something that affects, not just the Aboriginal people, but people in the community generally, so I think that's a really big possible from being regional. I think in terms of regional artists just putting themselves out there, not being afraid to try different things. Like I put my hand up for the leftfield project, I put my work into the NSW Parliament Art Prize, so I think taking the opportunities even that might be terrifying. And then in terms of, I guess overall change I think its institutions and curators, particularly from metro, thinking outside of the box, thinking beyond the sandstone curtain, there's a world full of artists who have a lot to say, who are just as good as artists who are in the city and there's some amazing people, which a snippet of us showcased here, but we've got so many vibrant, interesting artists who have found their voice and are doing amazing work and just need the opportunity to show that beyond the region, to show what we have here. We are not the poor country cousins who, who just need the helping hand up, we have a lot to say and we just need to be given the

opportunity to put that out there for people. The best advice I got when I was part of the West Farmers program in Canberra was that to do one thing a day that scares you, so today that's my interview. [Laughter]

[Music]

Nicole Welch: I think the regional box on forms and applications is a really important thing but in terms of the label I think, I think that's where its purpose starts and ends really.

[Music]

Nicole Welch: My name Nicole Welch and I live Bathurst and I'm a media artist. My practice is media based so I work with photography and video and thematically I'm interested in investigating landscape and in particular Australian landscape. So this region of Kandos and the surrounding country is central to my practice and my work. It's a self portrait, it is a time lapse, and it's a performance that I undertook in the landscape. I'm a little bit shy so I thought about a performance here at Kandos but when I thought it through I was more comfortable to do the performance in the landscape, lay on a large rectangular mirror and record it as a time lapse, so I was laying there for over an hour holding a pose, trying not to move which is virtually impossible, and then the time lapse, the figure disappears and the time lapse continues into the night with the skyscape and the stars passing over. So with this work I'm draped in a 1880s chantilly mourning shawl and that shawl for me is symbolic of the environmental devastation that we're experiencing with climate change and also specifically in this region because of the mining and industry and human presence that exists here and what that has cost in terms of wilderness. It is a wilderness region, and its known for that, but it has actually has been fairly damaged and there are a lot of species here that are endangered, like the region honey eater are critically endangered, so the shawl for me is a symbol of that loss and mourning for what was, and that idea of that beautiful notion of wildness that is a myth. It's, I mean we are surrounded by country here, landscape here, this is a community that is, that really has developed off, you know, the commodity of farming. But it also has an interesting, it has another element with the cement factories, so it has the industry here which is a landmark in this country and we have a lot of mining, so these communities have existed because of that. So, it's an amazing place in that you have wilderness zone juxtaposed right alongside industry like mining and that for me is the interesting part of the human element in the landscape.

[Music]

Nicole Welch: So the video work has the audio of the wind in the external worlds, so in the landscape and the separate audio track is an internal soundscape of a wolf howling for about a minute, so it a lone wolf recording, it hasn't been edited, it's a single lone wolf recording from start to finish. And that for me is symbolic of the European notion of wilderness, the wolf, the European wolf is connected to the woods, the idea of something frightening and unsettling in the woods and the unknown. And that notion of wilderness is something that we've projected on to this landscape, and the Australian landscape when the Europeans came here, and I think in our psyche it's ever present. On a personal note the wolf is also symbolic of Lupis which is Latin for wolf. So, it's an illness that I have for, I think, I've lost track now which is probably a good thing, but around 13 years, so for me this work was a way of acknowledging that experience. When I am in the landscape and I'm working, and I can see that there's this environmental destruction that happens because of human presence, I couldn't help but reflect that my own body and the break down of my own ecology and

environment, you know internal environment. I think acknowledging the personal in an artwork for an artist is challenging. I believe that all work is autobiographical whether you acknowledge it or not. Other people might disagree with me there, but I think we put so much of ourselves into our work intentionally, but when we choose to do it intentionally, certainly in my case, it felt courageous but quite frightening.

[Music]

Nicole Welch: Well Cementa's huge, it's really huge for regional artists, and not just myself, but I've got you know a couple of other friends here with me who have shown at Cementa previously, and for us it really is this amazing opportunity to connect with people in the art scene that we don't know. We might know artists through social media and watching things from afar but we can't, we don't actually know these people, we can't get to openings, we are not connected directly to organisations, so we might email back and forth or be known to organisations, but the opportunity to meet and network, and to show work amongst peers and to engage, and discuss and see, I mean, it's very important and extremely enriching for us regionals, although we don't like to label ourselves that way. I think the regional box on forms and applications is a really important thing, you know, we accept that there is that box and it needs to be ticked if you are going for a grant or an organisation is getting funding to do something with regional artists, but in terms of the label I think that were its purpose starts and ends really. I think there are disadvantages of being out here for sure but we see a lot of positives as well, to you know, the cost of living is a lot lower obviously, the influences are slightly different, so we don't see ourselves as outsiders, or at least I don't see myself as an outsider. I'm very aware of what is happening in metropolitan art or internationally and that's the great thing about the period of time that we are living in, you know, you could be a regional artist and have an international profile and that's because of the internet and the way that communication is set up. We used to talk about, in feminism you talk about a glass ceiling, out here we talk about the glass wall that appears somewhere past Katoomba and just before Penrith, and all of us regionals are pressed against that wall, you know "Let us in, let us in!" It seemed to be there, and we couldn't sort of break through into the metropolitan arts scene, very hard to get representation and very hard to get shown in different institutions or organisations, but that's really shifting. Personally it shifted for me through representation with May Space, formerly known as Brenda May Gallery, and she, you know, she's been really great in supporting my practice and giving me a profile in Sydney and without that kind of support I definitely wouldn't've been able to make four shows in five years, so it has been really important for me. I'd like to see that opportunity available to more of my colleagues, and it doesn't have to be through commercial spaces, it can be through other initiatives and institutions in Sydney engaging with us more, getting us to come in and access resources, space, to show our work, and networks, that's really important. So I think sometimes with that box when institutions, metropolitan institutions, are ticking it they are thinking of what they can send out into the country to culture the region, to culture the community, and on the other side we are thinking "We want in".

[Music]

Sarah Waterson: I'm surprised that people are surprised that I would want to grow a *Paphiopedilum Rothschildianum*, it's a beautiful orchid, come on.

[Music]

Sarah Waterson: I'm Sarah Waterson and I'm based in Sydney and I have a practice in what was called new media art. The work I am presenting here at CEMENTA17 is called *Hothouse* and inside the house I'm running an Arduino board to control some weather. The weather is coming in from Mt. Kinabalu in Borneo to create an ecosystem to grow a *Paphiopedilum Rothschildianum*. I guess the exchange value is kind of interesting for this, and to take something out of its natural environment. The amount of technology that I've set up to sustain it is quite incredible and for me it's more of a comment on colonialism and the transportation there. But also, the impossibilities of technology in saving our ecosystems, or pretending that technology can do something about this. The amount of inputs that have gone into building this house is quite incredible. It has taken me over a year for me to kind of design it and get it working, and it's not a ecosystem, it is one plant, in one flask, inside a cloud environment. It won't propagate itself, there's a little fly that propagates the orchid in Borneo, so yeah.

[Music]

Sarah Waterson: When I was invited to come to be part of CEMENTA I was trying to think of a work that would make sense to me to make here, obviously, and for me this idea of locating something other than yourself somewhere else, so for the *Paphiopedilum* in the thing, we are transporting it to here, we are setting up an environment for it to thrive, bring the weather in from Borneo for it to thrive. For me that's sort of what I am doing as an artist here, I'm coming in, I'm trying to have a shared cultural experience with the people coming to CEMENTA and the locals, and it's kind of like this transposition of something somewhere else, bit of a colonialist activity really. In terms of keeping this orchid alive I'm sure many growers around the world in their glasshouses can have a specimen of the *Paphiopedilum Rothschildianum* but what does it mean for that orchid to be alive in the glasshouses, it's not in natural environments. It's not, it still needs to be attended to, someone has to propagate it with a brush or whatever, there's no other plant life around it. So it's not part of that ecosystem anymore. I don't, I think we all think technology will save us one day, yeah it might give incursion, we might not have to have things that pollute the environment or whatever, but in terms of recreating natural habitats, I think that is not something that we can do. I think the cybernetic thinkers in the early 20s, around that time, all thought that if you knew all the inputs and outputs of a system, you could actually reproduce it, but all of the experiments that they did, the one with the buffalo grasses comes to mind, were all failures, abject failures, it didn't matter how many inputs they had, it didn't matter if they cut open the stomach of the buffalo to see how many grasses and species it consumed and weighed that and kind of worked out that, it actually failed, it was an abysmal failure because ecosystems are quite erratic and they're random, and I think in this day and age were sort of thinking that system thinking will save us and I think it doesn't matter how much data we have or whatever, we still have a failure.

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Ann Finegan: So of course, CEMENTA, Documenta, Prospecta, and there was a bumper sticker 'Cement A Friendship'.

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Ann Finegan: Ok, so, I'm Ann Finegan I'm one of the Co-Directors of CEMENTA contemporary arts festival in KANDOS, and I discovered this town one sunny afternoon around about 2009, fell in love with it, it was like a film set, empty streets, two o'clock, Gary Cooper, high noon,

sunlight on the escarpment. So within about half an hour we had met all these artsy people in town, we were then introduced to the Nuttings, we decided it was kind of art friendly, and hence we persevered with the building. I just started out with a sort of very low-key residency program. So it was just sort of friends, David Haines and Joyce Hinterding moved in over the road into the kind of wet studio and David was making perfumes, experimental sound, Josie and Leon came, you know **Starth and Chemelsky (32:27)** and because I've got a background in kind of, you know, film and digital arts, media arts, we kind of had that electronic arts presence in the town. And then through Margaret Roberts, who I had worked with at Artspace, she came up, and she was with the Williams River group and they had been doing some activist work up in the Williams River, so they started making activist works, working with the coal mining expansion in the Bylong Valley. So kind of had a really good cluster of people just working in the town, and we just decided, well first of all before I met Georgie and Alex I probably had about 20 artists projects already happening in town, it was just sort of, you know, serendipity blah blah blah, and they just happened to have index, and I really liked some of their artists, you know, like Gilbert Grace with the ARTcycle project, I really liked Diego Bonetto, the forage food stuff, and there was a guy called Peter McGuinness who dropped out who would raid railways sidings and peoples backyard fences for grapes and make his own really, really bad wine, and he would hand paint the labels, it was undrinkable, but I just absolutely loved the project. So, you know, we just kind of realised that we had all this work and nowhere to go, so there already a wonderful contemporary art gallery down the road in 47. I've never been interested in minding the space, I never wanted a gallery. So I just used to put things in the windows, and mix it up with, you know, the local guy from Rylstone who had tribal art collection. You know we did all kinds of stuff, the high school things, sort of you know, community plus artists doing things.

[Music]

So this American dude came to Kandos and he was telling us how he had bought a place called Venice outside of New York so he could have this own Venice Biennale. So of course, CEMENTA, Documenta, Prospecta, and there was a bumper sticker 'Cement A Friendship'. And we were all in love with the cement works which had just closed. So the festival was quite an organic thing basically because we had work and artists waiting in the wings, you know all dressed up and nowhere to show. And the people in the town were wonderfully supportive and there's a wonderful Councillor called Esme Martins, she checked me out at Down the Tracks café, decided I needed to be checked out even further, came and bailed me up for two hours in Kandos Projects, decided, you know, we were kind of legit enough. We were three directors which is really unusual, three co-directors, I in particular didn't want anybody to be in charge, so suppose we are quite anarchic. And the idea is we just we just talk until we agree, sometimes it really fast, sometimes it takes a long time as you can imagine. And, you know, I'm very happy with that process, you know, it can be a bit time consuming and it can be a little bit messy at times, but you know, I'm happy with that.

[Music]

It's very important that we develop the culture, grow the culture of contemporary art. A lot our artists do workshops in the local schools and that's very important, we also have ones for primary school children, like Michael Petchkovsky electronics workshop, Tina Stevens did a drumming workshop, so we really expand the process. Damian Castaldi and Solange Kershaw did an Arduino project. So it's about kind of skilling up, and since we came here, Dulux were part of the first one, they have done a lot more regional works. So that whole thing of, you know, how to you bridge regional urban divide? The Salon was always just going to be

anybody can bring anything and we will hang it. And we have to do that to welcome everybody, at the same time the funded part of the festival has to be curated. So that's how we are trying to balance everything. So through our workshops and we have other exhibitions during the year, not always here but sometimes in other places, that's how we kind of, you know, foster the development of, you know, various projects, you know, sort of mentoring regional artists along. And the whole idea of bringing the city artists in to this environment, is so the work relates to this environment, we are not just parachuting stuff in. So every so often an artist might come for a while and not really develop a work which responds, but at least the artist has been here. But I would say out of all the artists we have shown in Cementa, which, you know, must be at least 180 by now, there would only be three or four who haven't made works specific to Kandos. We don't want to overstate who we are, or what we are doing. I think simply by bringing this kind of artwork into town it expands people's perception of art and the people in town they just "Oh I'm really excited about what I'm going to see" it's this unknown factor, they like this unexpected way artists can sort of revision the landscape, or reshape your perspectives it's a really good thing to bring to a country town, just expands the horizons and I think that's a sort of slow thing. I would just like it to be, you know, like, sort of you know, Documenta in Kassel, there are kids that have grown up in Kassel, they've grown up with the festival, wouldn't that be great.

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Voice over: Head to our website visualarts.net.au for more information on NAVA's advocacy and campaigns for improving the working environment for Australian artists and arts organisations.